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UNDERSTANDING THE UNDERLYING DYNAMICS OF TURKISH-AZERBAIJANI RELATIONS: “ONE NATION, TWO STATES?”

Abstract: The objective of this study is to analyze the underlying factors within Turkish-Azerbaijani relations that is encapsulated in the motto, “One nation, two states,” focusing on the main challenges and differences between the two countries. This article maps out the shifting dynamics of bilateral relations since Azerbaijani independence in 1991 and reveals the political, economic and cultural underpinnings of bilateral relations. This study discusses the place of Turkey and Azerbaijan within each other’s foreign policy calculations and claims that the current phase of Turkish-Azerbaijani relations is driven by the national pragmatic interests of each state despite the initial years of romanticized relations. It reveals that the national interests of Turkey and Azerbaijan do not always align and they follow pragmatic national interests, despite their “One nation, two states” rhetoric. The strategic partnership of the two states relies on the energy and transportation projects, as well as cultural, historical and ethnic affinity. However, the political, economic, and cultural contingencies have also been crucial to map out the broader picture of bilateral relations.

Keywords: Turkey-Azerbaijan relations, “One nation, two states,” energy relations, partnership, flag crisis.

Introduction

The objective of this study is to analyze Turkish-Azerbaijani relations, focusing on the main challenges and differences in bilateral relations despite the narrative of their uniqueness and ideal relations. It focuses on political, economic and cultural underpinnings and the differences within these relations. This regional nexus has undergone certain transformations over the past three decades and plays a vital role in regional dynamics. After the collapse of the USSR, relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan began to develop within the context of ethnic, cultural and historical affinity. Following the dissolution period, Turkey moved to fill the religious and ideological vacuum left by Russia. On November 9, 1991, Turkey became the first state to officially recognize
the independence of the Republic of Azerbaijan. After the official recognition, the countries established diplomatic relations on January 14, 1992. Turkey’s positive image in Azerbaijan is due to its economic development, secularism, and close ties with the West, and this helped to build economic and political ties as well. However, since early 1993, the romanticized relations have been subject to challenges and shifts. Despite the steadily improving friendly relations and the strategic partnership between these two countries, there are several challenges posed by changing realities and perceptions. The identification of these challenges and contingencies is crucial for understanding the real dynamics of bilateral relations and challenging the narrative of the “uniqueness” of Turkish-Azerbaijani relations.

This study consists of three main parts. The first part sheds light on the academic literature tackling Turkish-Azerbaijani relations. The second part maps out the dynamics of the development of relations from the initial stage of engagement in the 1990s as well as the milestones of bilateral relations elaborating on each country’s place in the other’s foreign policy. The third section examines the parameters of contingencies in bilateral relations in the political, economic and cultural spheres and the countries’ positions on these issues. The key findings of the research are provided in the conclusion.

**Literature review**

**Defining Turkish-Azerbaijani relations**

A considerable amount of literature tackles the dynamics of Turkish-Azerbaijani bilateral relations. The literature on Turkish-Azerbaijani relations mainly focuses on the phases of the development of relations (from romanticism to pragmatism). Other much-discussed pillars of relations are ethnic kinship and energy cooperation as the main determinants of relations.

The common opinion is that the alliance between Azerbaijan and Turkey encapsulated in the “One nation, two states” discourse is mostly defined by their historical, ethnic, and cultural bonds. This approach is shared by most experts. The academic literature identifies three stages in the dynamics of Turkish-Azerbaijani relations. The first phase from 1991 to 1993 evolved in the narrative of “high expectations and hopes and
Turkey’s overestimated ability to help Azerbaijan.” The rhetoric of unity and brotherhood sometimes overrode reality due to the lack of understanding of each other’s interests and priorities, which led to euphoria. During the second stage, from 1993 to 1997, pragmatism and national interests became the cornerstones of relations, challenging the romanticized relations between the two countries. During the third phase starting in 1997, the energy sector became a higher priority and changed the dynamics in the Turkish-Azerbaijani relations, defining the transition from ‘romance to pragmatism’. During this period, bilateral relations reached the strategic partnership level and Turkey became a major consumer of Azerbaijan’s oil and gas resources. The relations began to shift because of certain factors since the early 2000s and this period was characterized as the “end of the honeymoon” between Azerbaijan and Turkey. Thus, the maxim coined by Heydar Aliyev “one nation-two states” has been subject to the pragmatic interests of the two countries. Svante Cornell identifies three main factors for this. Firstly, Turkey concentrated on its domestic affairs during the financial crisis of 2000–2001, which was followed by a political crisis. It focused on the European vector of its foreign policy. Secondly, the Islamic conservative party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) that had little enthusiasm for Turkic brotherhood came into power in November 2002. Finally, Demirel’s presidency ended (the personal relations between Aliyev and Demirel were considered to be the backbone of their bilateral relations). Nevertheless, relations were not subject to U-turns and deviations. The main difference was putting more emphasis on economic and energy relations preconditioned by the economic development of Turkey.

1 Nazrin Mehdyye, Power Games in the Caucasus: Azerbaijan’s Foreign and Energy Policy towards the West, Russia and the Middle East, (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2011).
4 Mehdyye, Power Games in the Caucasus, 185.
6 Soltanov, “Turkish-Azerbaijani relations,” 33-34.
The paramount significance of energy projects in the dynamics of Turkish-Azerbaijani relations is highlighted by another group of scholars. They share the common opinion that the Turkish-Azerbaijani relations gained new momentum through their energy partnership. Moreover, the current phase of Turkish-Azerbaijani relations is considered to be driven by energy cooperation. Three major energy projects define the energy relations between the two states: Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) Oil Pipeline (launched in 2006) and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) Natural Gas Pipeline (launched in 2007) also known as the South Caucasus Pipeline (SCP) and the Trans Anatolian Gas Pipeline (inaugurated in 2018).

After gaining independence, the Azerbaijani political elite decided to follow the Turkish model of development, which stipulated economic development, secularism and tight cooperation with the West. Azerbaijan has identified the following foreign policy priorities: foster the economy via large-scale exploitation of hydrocarbon resources; strengthen its military power; create a secular image of the country. In order to fulfill these objectives, Baku embraced Turkey as its main ally. In the National Security Concept, the strategic partnership with Turkey is mentioned as an important factor in maintaining peace and security in the region. However, Turkey’s perception of its role as a “big brother” has not always been encouraged by Azerbaijan, who did not want to be left at the periphery of bilateral relations. Therefore, Elif Kanca claims that the

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9 Soltanov, “Turkish-Azerbaijani relations,” 38.
12 Soltanov, “Turkish-Azerbaijani relations,” 40.
relations are subject to “hidden otherization under national identity ideology.”

The main factors shaping the Turkish policy towards Azerbaijan include counterbalancing Russia in the South Caucasus, mitigating Iranian propaganda, supporting independence, supporting Azerbaijan in the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, pursuing further cooperation in the energy sector and preserving a favorable administration. However, the relations with Azerbaijan did not top the list of foreign policy directions during the AKP tenure in the early 2000s, as the AKP government worked on developing relations with Western and Middle Eastern countries. In the framework of “zero problems with the neighbors,” the initiatives to normalize relations between Armenia and Turkey led to a major crisis in Turkish-Azerbaijani relations. From 2008-2011, Turkey faced a number of domestic and regional turbulences parallel with increased popular support for the incumbent AKP that affected its development path and a redefined political agenda. The AKP’s political agenda was modified, as instead of the EU accession talks and strong pro-Western sentiments, it was more about economic development, Turkey's descent into Erdogan’s authoritarianism and perpetual debate on secularism. Nevertheless, despite the cool relations at the beginning of AKP rule and Azerbaijan’s cautiousness of the AKP’s “religiosity” and social conservatism, the president of Azerbaijan, İlham Aliyev, has strengthened relations with his Turkish counterpart due to their predilection for authoritarian tendencies. Moreover, the AKP “2023 Vision” defines Azerbaijan as a unique partner and emphasizes Turkish continuous efforts “to end the Armenian occupation.”

However, the literature mostly discusses the exceptional character of Turkish-Azerbaijani relations that is encapsulated in a fashionable

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motto “one nation, two states.” Only a few scholars have managed to look deeper into the factors that underlie these bilateral relations. While there is certain literature on the omissions of the past crises, the causes of those crises, which mainly derive from the different positions and perceptions of issues and realities and their recent developments have not been properly addressed. Moreover, the existing literature does not comprehensively address the many challenges and divergences of the relationship. The “quasiperfect convergence of viewpoints and interests,” does not reflect reality. Therefore, in order to define the underpinnings of this regional nexus, this article identifies political, economic and cultural sets of differences in Turkish-Azerbaijani relations. The 1995 March coup attempt, the relations during the Karabakh War and the Flag crisis during the Armenian-Turkish rapprochement process, the PKK factor, Azerbaijan’s stance on the TRNC and the consequences of the deterioration of the Turkish-Israeli relations make up a list of political divergences between Turkey and Azerbaijan. Amid the successful projects that drive bilateral relations, Azerbaijan and Turkey have incompatibilities in their energy policies as Turkey aspires to become an energy hub and Azerbaijan seeks direct energy supplies to Europe. Cultural relations, which include issues of religion and language, will also be discussed in the article.

Methodology and research design

The Azerbaijan-Turkey east-west axis, grounded on ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and historical characteristics, has undergone considerable shifts due to the challenges posed by changing realities, mutual perceptions or misconceptions. Therefore, in order to map out a broader picture of the structural dynamics of Turkish-Azerbaijani bilateral relations, the research questions are as follows:

- Do Turkish-Azerbaijani relations fit into the conceptual framework “One nation, two states”?
- What underlying factors shape the dynamics within bilateral relations?

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In order to answer this research question, the following hypotheses should be tested:

**HP1:** Turkey and Azerbaijan are guided by pragmatic intentions and national interests that do not always coincide. Therefore, “One nation, two states” is a rhetorical maxim rather than reality.

**HP2:** Divergences in various spheres shape the dynamics of bilateral relations and can cause milestone shifts in relations.

This study uses an exploratory research design with qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection. The data analysis of this research is based on secondary sources such as scholarly articles and media archives, as well as official and non-official statements made by the heads of the countries and other high-level officials and official statistics illustrating the scale of economic relations.

**General Background of the Turkish-Azerbaijani bilateral relations**

*The establishment and development of bilateral relations*

Initially, the bilateral relations unfolded in the framework of Turkey’s Eurasian policy where Azerbaijan was an important pillar. Among the newly independent Turkic republics, Azerbaijan could offer unique opportunities for Turkey due to its geographical closeness, attractive energy resources and cultural affinity. After the official recognition of Azerbaijan’s independence in November 1991, the Turkish Consulate General in Baku was upgraded to the embassy level in January 1992. Initially, relations developed slowly as the first President of Azerbaijan, Ayaz Mutalibov, was vigilant in building relations with Turkey since he feared his powerful neighbors. Moreover, though President Mutalibov paid his first official visit to Turkey in January 1992, where a friendship and cooperation agreement was signed, his Turkish counterparts did not share his willingness to tighten military

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coopetion. Thus, Mutalibov’s pro-Russian orientation hindered the development of closer ties at the outset of the partnership. Unlike his predecessor, Abufaz Elçibey was quite passionate about Turkey and his overtly pro-Turkish stance highly affected Azerbaijan’s foreign policy agenda. Elçibey’s “erratic style” and vehement pan-Turkic, anti-Russian and anti-Iranian rhetoric strained Azerbaijan’s relations with Russia and Iran. Moreover, despite being an ardent supporter of Turkey, Elçibey was perceived as a “destabilizing factor” in Turkish political circles who hindered Turkish goals in the region. However, due to Elçibey and Turkish President Turgut Özal’s personal efforts (he was a passionate advocate of Azerbaijan) the relations between the two remained friendly.

When Heydar Aliyev consolidated political power in 1993, he strived to re-establish stability in relations with Russia and Iran and balance his policy towards Turkey. Moreover, in September 1993, Aliyev withdrew from a number of agreements signed by the Elçibey administration, removed Turkish military officers from the country, and introduced a visa regime for Turkish citizens. However, after strengthening his positions domestically, Aliyev reassured his confidence in Turkey. Moreover, President Aliyev’s “routine visits to Turkey in the early 1990s” provided insight into Azerbaijan’s domestic and foreign policy regarding Turkey. Aliyev paid an official visit to Turkey after his inauguration in February 1994 with a delegation of 80 members to emphasize the importance of his visit. Aliyev’s first address delivered to the Turkish Parliament on February 6, 1994, was aimed at dispelling the skepticism regarding bilateral relations. During the same visit, at the “Chankaya” palace reception, Aliyev delivered a speech where the famous phrase “one nation, two states” was coined while describing “the

22 Cornel, Independence, 366.
unity of the historical roots” between the two countries.27 The features of democracy, secularity, state institutions and economic development were the focus of Aliyev’s subsequent speeches in Turkey.28 However, relations soured due to a coup attempt in 1994 led by Azerbaijani Interior Deputy Minister Rovshan Javadov.29 Aliyev accused the Turkish embassy in Baku as well as Turkish Prime Minister Tansu Çiller of being linked to the coup attempt.30 Though this theory was later proven in Turkish intelligence reports, the detailed evidence was never revealed. However, the fact that high-level officials were publicly discussing this issue was concerning. Nevertheless, the close friendship between Aliyev and Demirel prevented Turkish-Azerbaijani relations from collapsing as the latter warned Aliyev about the possible coup.

In the mid-1990s, Turkey’s policy in Azerbaijan was at its lowest point with the victory of the Welfare Party in the parliamentary election in December 1995 in Turkey. Only in February 1997, when the Welfare Party was forced out of power by Military Memorandum, Turkey reassessed its policy toward Azerbaijan. In May 2000, the former head of the Constitutional Court, Ahmet Necdet Sezer succeeded Süleyman Demirel as president. As a professional lawyer, he prioritized the rule of law and democracy and was reluctant to build tight relations with his Azerbaijani counterparts. Azerbaijani authorities condemned Sezer’s intolerance towards the democratic flaws of a transitional society.31

30 Cornell, Azerbaijan, 372.
Nevertheless, while paying an official visit to Baku, Sezer expressed Turkey’s solidarity with Azerbaijan in the Karabakh issue at the Azerbaijani Parliament.32

However, while the Turkish presidents took a more balanced position towards Azerbaijan, the differences between Elçibey’s and the Aliyevs’ presidencies are obvious. The Aliyevs eventually acknowledged that the Azerbaijani interpretation of Turkey’s unconditional brotherhood was quite exaggerated and tempted by considerations of ongoing realities. This frustration concluded the honeymoon phase between Turkey and Azerbaijan. Moreover, the destination of Heydar and Ilham Aliyevs’ first official visits was not Turkey until 2008. The visits were paid to Paris in order to enhance the level of bilateral relations and court France during the peace process of the NK conflict. However, after being re-elected in 2008, 2013, and 2018, the first country Ilham Aliyev visited each time was Turkey. During his 2008 speech delivered to the Grand National Assembly in Turkey, he mainly emphasized the importance of economic cooperation and the BTC project.33 The fact that there have been only three foreign presidents to deliver a speech at the Turkish parliament and that two of them have been presidents of Azerbaijan also indicates the level of relations. The speeches of all the presidents were mainly focused on fraternity, the NK conflict, hydrocarbon and transport projects. However, economic cooperation has become more emphasized in Ilham Aliyev’s addresses, which also points out the increasing role of the energy mega-projects in bilateral relations.

Under AKP rule, Turkey’s policy towards the Caucasus was revised as it prioritized religious identity rather than shared ethnicity. However Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, with fewer international friends, sees Azerbaijan as a dependable ally. Since assuming the post of the Prime Minister (2002-2014), Erdoğan has made a dozen official visits to Baku. Baku (after Northern Cyprus) was the first foreign destination for the Prime Minister after each election. In July


2018, after being elected president, Erdoğan paid an official visit to Azerbaijan and, in his address, he highlighted the importance of the energy projects and mainly TANAP.\textsuperscript{34} Thus, the geography of the mutual visits indicated the closeness of relations between the two states, though the nature of their addresses changed slightly from the fraternal rhetoric to focus on more pragmatic issues (mainly the hydrocarbon projects).

The friendly perceptions of the people both in Turkey and Azerbaijan also contribute to the development of relations. The results of the Public Perceptions Polls on Turkey’s foreign policy by Kadir Has University portray Azerbaijan as the friendliest country with 65.3\%.\textsuperscript{35} This percentage has been increasing over time. Azerbaijan’s perception was also expressed in another question: "With which countries Turkey should cooperate in implementing its foreign policy?" Azerbaijan was the first in this list as well, with 44.5\%.\textsuperscript{36} Due to the method of elimination, it can be found that as soon as Turkey deteriorates relations with the West, Azerbaijan remains its only friend, following the saying “a Turk has no other friend but a Turk.”

The Energy Dimension of the Turkish-Azerbaijani Relations

The end of the “romance” period brought a new momentum to Turkish-Azerbaijani relations via energy projects. After declaring its independence, Azerbaijan initiated restoring itself to the position of an oil-exporting nation and launched the exploitation of hydrocarbon reserves following its foreign policy priorities of fostering economic growth via energy resources and alleviating its dependence on Russia by exporting energy resources without going through Russia.\textsuperscript{37} In 1994, the Contract of Century on the joint development of the Azeri-Chirag-Deepwater Guneshli oil reservoirs inaugurated a new era for bilateral

\textsuperscript{35} Mustafı Aydın et al., Public Perceptions on Turkish Foreign Policy, (Ankara, Center for Turkish Studies, Kadir Has University, 2019).
\textsuperscript{36} ibid
\textsuperscript{37} Shaffer, “Azerbaijan’s foreign policy,”82.
    Dikkaya and Strakes, “A Paradigm Shift,”90.
energy relations.\textsuperscript{38} Considering Turkey’s internal and geopolitical peculiarities, Turkey has identified the diversification of energy sources and participation in the construction of energy transport corridors as the main determinants of its energy strategy.\textsuperscript{39} Azerbaijan’s role as a major supplier and a strategic fulcrum for the transportation of Caspian hydrocarbon reserves has generated mutual dependence between Turkey and Azerbaijan, catapulting Azerbaijan from a poor neighbor into an important ally.

Three major energy projects (BTC, BTE, TANAP) define the economic as well as political relations of the countries. The flagship BTC pipeline project (inaugurated in 2006) turned Turkey into a key actor in the transportation of Caspian oil to the global energy markets. While considered one of the most successful pipelines in the world, the BTC paved the way for two other energy projects in the region. The BTE gas pipeline (active since 2007) has more significance in providing Turkey’s economic security and diversifying its gas supplies, considering Russia’s share of over 50% of Turkey’s gas imports. Thus, the imports of Azerbaijani gas ensure the diversification of gas supplies, reducing dependence on a single source.

The operation of the TANAP pipeline (inaugurated in 2018) is a strategic achievement for Turkey, allowing it to capitalize its vision of becoming a top-notch energy power. At the same time, it will alleviate its dependency on Russian gas by 40% in 2026.\textsuperscript{40} TANAP provides diversification of Azerbaijani export destinations by transferring Shah Deniz II gas to Europe. The latter’s hydrocarbon legacy from the USSR was mainly connected to Russia. Though the gas price remains a commercial secret (the Azerbaijani gas prices for Turkey are regulated by three long-term agreements which are to expire in 2021, 2032/2033 and 2046), cheaper Azerbaijani gas will allow Turkey to manipulate the Russian and Iranian prices. Moreover, the energy-oriented momentum between Turkey and Azerbaijan serves as an effective foreign policy tool

\textsuperscript{38} Rovshan Ibrahimov, “Turkish-Azerbaijani Energy Relations: Significant Leverage in the Implementation of the Foreign Policy Interests of Both Countries.” \textit{Insight Turkey} 17, no.2 (Spring 2015): 83-100.
\textsuperscript{40} Has, “Turkey-Azerbaijan-Not Only Energy Affair.”
in their generic goal of alienating Armenia from regional mega-projects. However, though the energy projects have become a major catalyst for Turkish-Azerbaijani relations, there are certain disagreements that will be discussed.

**Disagreements in political relations**

*The Turkish Stance on the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict*

Turkey has frequently expressed its unconditional support for Azerbaijan in the NK conflict. Being the first challenge to Turkish-Azerbaijani relations, the NK conflict has been a major galvanizer in consolidating relations.

Turkey has never demonstrated the military will to increase its support to Azerbaijan regarding the NK issue.\(^{41}\) Certain factors hindered Turkey’s military engagement in the NK conflict during the first years of the war. Domestic political instability was a major obstacle including the fighting against the PKK at the beginning of the 1990s. Secondly, Turkey and Azerbaijan did not have a military assistance agreement. Though the parties signed an agreement on Military Cooperation provisioning mutual assistance in case of foreign aggression in 1992, it excluded legitimate Turkish intervention as in that case Armenia had to be recognized as an aggressor by the UN Security Council. Moreover, Turkey adopted a more cautious policy and rejected signing an agreement on mutual security suggested by Baku in the summer of 1992.\(^{42}\) The next factor was Turkish relations with the West and the fear of creating substantial obstacles for the EU assessment. Moreover, any Turkish attempt to cooperate with Armenia raised outrage in Azerbaijan as it would have weakened the energy blockade of Armenia. In 1993, Armenia and Turkey were negotiating a deal on electricity supply to Armenia. The Azerbaijani Foreign Minister stated that the energy deal was “a stab in the back.”\(^{43}\) Due to the Azerbaijani criticism and opposition pressure in Turkey, the Demirel government broke the deal before its execution.\(^{44}\) While

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41 Soltanov, “Turkish-Azerbaijani relations,” 43.
42 Айк Демоян, Турция и Карабахский конфликт в конце XX-начале XXI веков. Историко-сравнительный анализ (Ереван:Авторское издание, 2006). 129-130.
Azerbaijan could somehow tolerate Turkey’s reluctance for military intervention, the cooperation with Armenian in this framework was unacceptable.

The most ardent critic of the absence of the Turkish assistance was head of the Nationalist Movement Party, Alparslan Türkeş, claiming that “Turkey cannot stand idly by while Azerbaijan’s territory is being occupied.”45 The head of the Democratic Left Party, Bülent Ecevit, asserted that not providing unambiguous support for Azerbaijan could undermine Turkey’s authority in Azerbaijan. The main opposition leader, Mesut Yılmaz, argued for Turkish troops to be deployed along the Armenian border to deter Armenian advances.46 The Armenian advances in May 1992 caused Ankara to take a clear stance in support of Azerbaijan. Turkish Prime Minister Demirel and President Özal had different stances on Turkish intervention in Karabakh. While Demirel was quite reluctant to accept Turkish direct support unless Turkey had the support of the great powers, Özal claimed that the Armenians needed to be “a little bit scared.”47 However, after the Armenian armed forces captured the Kelbajar district, Turkey severed all the means of communication between Turkey and Armenia.48 Nevertheless, Turkey did not play the role Azerbaijan expected and was not as powerful as Azerbaijan thought. Despite Azerbaijani expectations, the only tangible move from Turkey was the closure of borders and Azerbaijan blames Turkey for its failure in Karabakh, claiming that the closure of borders was not enough and that Azerbaijan should have been valued more highly. More recently, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan backed Azerbaijan during the Four Day War in April 2016 with his standard verbalized expressions such as Azerbaijan is “the rightful owner” of NK, Armenia is an aggressor, etc.49 However, in July 2020, when Azerbaijan attacked the Armenian border in Tavush, Turkey’s Defence Minister Hulusi Akar’s statements were tougher than usual, claiming that Armenia

46 Ibid
47 Soltanov, “Turkish-Azerbaijani relations,” 22.
49 “Erdogan: Karabakh will be returned to Azerbaijan one day,” Daily Sabah, 4 April, 2016 https://www.dailysabah.com/europe/2016/04/05/erdogan-karabakhwill-be-returned-to-azerbaijan-one-day (accessed 16 July 2020).
“will be brought into account” for attacking Azerbaijan. Nevertheless, President Erdogan’s statement was a continuation of Ankara’s usual rhetoric of unconditional support and solidarity. Thus, the Turkish stance on the NK conflict contributed to the collapse of romanticism in bilateral relations. Despite the absence of official statements claiming that Turkey will provide military assistance if Baku initiates war, Azerbaijan claims that Turkey has guaranteed such assistance, referencing the military alliance between them.

**Rapprochement in the Armenian-Turkish relations and its impact on Azerbaijan**

One of the major shocks that the Turkish-Azerbaijani relations experienced has been the Armenian-Turkish rapprochement and their culmination in the Zurich Protocols in October 2009. However, six months after signing the protocols, the Turkish Prime Minister declared that the ratification of the protocols depended on the NK conflict resolution process. Subsequently, Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan suspended the Protocols in 2010 and recalled them in 2015. The rapprochement instigated vociferous debates and waves of protests in both Azerbaijani public and political cycles.

The AKP government undertook measures for the implementation of a “zero problems with neighbors” policy to materialize its ambitions of becoming a regional power. Azerbaijan felt uneasy about this initiative since the launch of so-called “football diplomacy”, when President of Turkey Abdullah Gul arrived in Yerevan to watch the FIFA world cup Armenia-Turkey qualifying match with Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan in 2008. At the beginning of the crisis, Azerbaijan was

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52 Rovshan Ibrahimov, “Turkish-Azerbaijani Energy Relations: Significant Leverage in the Implementation of the Foreign Policy Interests of Both Countries.”Insight Turkey 17, no.2 (Spring 2015): 83-100.

reluctant to directly meet with the Turkish government. The Azerbaijani elite believed that Turkey would not sign any agreement without referring to the NK conflict and expected “parallel processes” with the rapprochement. Nevertheless, Azerbaijan launched media mobilization articulating the narrative of the negative impact of the rapprochement on Azerbaijani-Turkish relations. Azerbaijan intensified bonds with the Turkish opposition mainly with the Republican People’s and the Nationalist Movement Parties. Finally, Azerbaijan used its energy card to make Turkey reshape its policy, suggesting shifting the direction of its energy cooperation with the EU countries toward Russia. Leaked U.S. diplomatic cables revealed that President Aliyev was resentful of Turkish-Armenian reconciliation efforts and distrustful of Turkey. Moreover, Aliyev expresses his discontent through boycotting bilateral and multilateral events like the Alliance of Civilizations Summit held in Istanbul. President Gül and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had a phone conversation with Aliyev urging him to join the Summit and offered to organize a meeting with Obama. Nevertheless, Aliyev was quite obstinate. Furthermore, he did not even delegate any high-level representatives, besides his daughter. Abdullah Gül’s assertion that “Turkey thinks of Azerbaijan in its every act” also failed to inspire confidence. The Azerbaijani opposition media blamed Armenia for misleading Turkey and denied the self-interest of their ally. At the same time, opposition leaders in Azerbaijan (such as Isa Gambar from Musavat Party) claimed that the normalization of the Turkish-Armenian relations would open new perspectives for the resolution of the Karabakh conflict. However, after the Protocols were signed, the opposition parties made a statement that the rapprochement without the NK issue as a precondition would harm Turkish-Azerbaijani relations.

54 Elhan Mehtiyev, “Turkish-Armenian Protocols: An Azerbaijani Perspective,” Insight Turkey 12, no.2 (Spring 2010):41-47.
58 Ibid, 197.
Nevertheless, on 10 October 2009, Ahmet Davutoğlu and Edward Nalbandyan, Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Armenia and Turkey, signed protocols “On the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations” and “On the Development of Bilateral Relations”. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan released a statement claiming that “Turkey’s decision directly contradicts the national interests of Azerbaijan and overshadows the spirit of brotherly relations between Azerbaijan and Turkey built on deep historical roots.” Azerbaijan regarded the official statement as a betrayal that forgave Armenia for its “violation” of Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity.

The emotional tension between Azerbaijan and Turkey reached its peak during the second episode of “football diplomacy” in Bursa on October 14, 2009, where Azerbaijan’s flag was not allowed in the stadium. The Azerbaijani media made an uproar showing the pictures of the flag thrown into a restroom box by a Turkish officer. On the next day, the Turkish flags in the Baku’s Martyrs’ Alley (memorial to Turkish soldiers who fought for Azerbaijan’s independence) were removed. Though Baku claimed that this was not a political move, the Turkish media claimed that it was a response to banning the Azeri flags during the football match.

Turkey spoiled the normalization process by tying it to the resolution of the NK conflict “to mitigate Azerbaijani resentment.” These developments incited Azerbaijan’s outrage because the backbone of Azerbaijani foreign policy towards Armenia was its “economic isolation and strategic marginalization,” exclusion of regional energy and transport projects. Thus, Turkey, hand in hand with the international community and Armenia, was going to destroy that strategy. The failure

62 Ibid.

of the normalization process brought to the fore the idea that the Turkish policy towards Armenia is decided in Baku rather than in Ankara.63

The political shocks due to the Armenian-Turkish rapprochement showed that relations should be built on rational and institutional bases. The developments provoked energy crisis, public hatred and even ramifications in religious issues (several Turkish mosques were shut down) and revealed that the Armenian-Turkish rapprochement had ramifications not only at the emotional level but also practically.

The Azerbaijani Stance on Northern Cyprus

Another significant issue in Turkish-Azerbaijani relations concerns Northern Cyprus where Baku officially tries to take a pro-Ankara position. In this regard, though several sources claim that in the late 1990s the Supreme Assembly of the Autonomous Republic of Nakhichevan recognized the independence of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus independence with a non-binding resolution, there has been no official statement of recognition or relevant comments from the Azerbaijani government.64 Azerbaijan itself does not recognize the TRNC because of concerns that it will create a precedent for the recognition of Nagorno-Karabakh. Turkey, however, claims that the conflicts are different and Azerbaijan ought to do more to help Northern Cyprus. Though the recognition of the TRNC has repeatedly been included in the parliament agenda of Azerbaijan, it has never been discussed considering the analogues with the NK conflict.65

In 2004, the issue of the TRNC generated higher pressure in Turkish-Azerbaijani relations when the Azerbaijani delegation missed the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in Strasburg voting to grant the TRNC representative status. The initiative failed and Azerbaijan was blamed in the headlines of the Turkish media for betraying its “big brother” and acting against Turkey’s interests. The head of the Azerbaijani delegation claimed the votes of six delegates of Azerbaijan

would not have saved the bill and the delegation avoided voting as the bill would create a precedent for the “recognition of unrecognized regimes.” The scandal escalated because just two weeks prior Aliyev pledged that if the Turkish side approved the Annan Plan for Cyprus reunification and the Greek Cypriots did not, Azerbaijan would recognize the TRNC. Though Greece rejected the Annan Plan, Azerbaijan did not recognize the independence of the TRNC. Once again, Azerbaijan explained its position using the example of the NK conflict. However, Aliyev yielded and became the first country after Turkey to launch regular direct flights to TRNC in 2005, violating the principles of international law. Moreover, Baku declared it would recognize TRNC passports and sent official representatives to the Peace and Freedom holiday in TRNC. However, due to Greek protests, the direct flights were postponed. Azerbaijan faced strong condemnation from the EU and its communicational and commercial ties with the TRNC impeded South Caucasus countries from starting negotiations on the EU Neighborhood Policy Action Plan on time because of the Greek veto. Thus, though the recognition of Northern Cyprus by Azerbaijan will not strengthen the bargaining potential of Turkey, it will increase Western opposition to Azerbaijan and cause Cyprus and Greece to recognize Nagorno Karabakh. In this case, Azerbaijan is driven by its own pragmatic interests despite Turkey’s pressure.

The Turkish-Israeli Crisis and Azerbaijan

Israel is considered to be a major factor in Turkish-Azerbaijani relations. In the late 1990s, the nature of the interaction of Israel with these two Muslim states especially in the energy security sector was so

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enthusiastic, that the relations were depicted in a trilateral framework (“trilateral axis” and “entente”). Azerbaijan followed Turkey and Egypt in establishing relations with Israel. It took several decades to do so. In 2010, Israeli-Turkish relations were at their lowest point. Israel attacked the Turkish aid boat Mavi Marmara that was headed to Gaza, causing the death of Turkish citizens. The Mavi Marmara crisis revealed that bilateral ties in this tripartite setup were much stronger than the “trilateral axis” itself. Thus, though Turkey put tremendous pressure on Baku to stand by Ankara in this stalemate, Baku was able to withstand the extreme pressure and continue its cooperation with Israel. On September 19, Turkish Ambassador Khulusi Kylych was interviewed on the government-friendly ANS TV, and he called on “brother Azerbaijan” to “reconsider its relations” with Israel, urging them to cut relations with Israel just as Turkey had closed the border with Armenia and threaten Israel with possible disruptions concerning their oil supply. Azerbaijan could not disregard its closest ally and voted for Palestine’s observer status at the UN. Though crisis and constant pressure caused Azerbaijan to distance itself from Turkey, Azerbaijani diplomacy passed its test in conflict management as the expediency and the pursuit of its own interests prompted the smaller state to preserve its relationship with Israel.

The Kurdish Issue in the Framework of Bilateral Relations

Another important component of Turkish-Azerbaijani relations is the Kurdish issue. The Kurdish minority in Azerbaijan led by Beylar Eyyubov, the President's security service chief, has been accused of

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contributing to Kurdish penetration from Iraq, Syria, Iran and Turkey. Though the head of the Public and Political Issues Department at the Presidential Administration Ali Hasanov denied the resettlement, the Turkish authorities considered it a political challenge. Generally, Kurds in Azerbaijan have close links to the Aliyev family and the Kurds occupy high-level positions, enjoying state sponsorship. Turkey is also concerned about allegations regarding links between Azerbaijani elites and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). Former National Security official Ibragim Musayev claimed that Azerbaijan was funneling arms and ammunition to the PKK through Nakhchivan despite being organized locally. Moreover, former Azerbaijani diplomat to Turkey, Turgut Er, claims that according to Elçibey, Heydar Aliyev contributed to the creation of the PKK and Ilham Aliyev inherited his Kurdish networks. However, a U.S. diplomatic cable in Wikileaks ascribed the rumors of Azerbaijani support of the PKK to the Azerbaijani opposition.

Nevertheless, despite constant Turkish demands, Azerbaijan has not legally recognized the PKK as a terrorist organization. The Spokesmen of the Foreign Ministry of Azerbaijan explained this, stating that there was an absence of an Azerbaijani policy of qualifying terrorist organizations. Though Baku has several times stated that Azerbaijan regards the PKK as a terrorist group, Azerbaijan is quite cautious in regards to satisfying Turkish demands in a legal resolution. Given the NK conflict, Azerbaijan is reluctant to have the Kurds as another antagonist strengthening Armenia’s bargaining position. The Turkish concerns and eagerness to have Azerbaijan adopt a legal document on the

PKK and Azerbaijan’s reluctance to do so, once more proves that the relations of these two countries are driven by their own interests.

**The disagreements in economic and energy relations**

Amid the successful projects that drive the economic and energy relations of Turkey and Azerbaijan, the two countries also diverge in a number of ways in this sector. Considered to be interdependent in energy relations, there is a certain incompatibility between the two countries’ energy policies. As an emerging energy hub, Turkey aspires to become a price formation center creating price benchmarks rather than serving as a transit county. In contrast, Azerbaijan seeks to become a direct energy supplier of gas to Europe. The crisis in 2009-2010 gas negotiations revealed differences in energy policies. Although many believe that Turkish-Armenian rapprochement was the main reason for the troubles in energy talks between Turkey and Azerbaijan in 2010, different interests and incompatibilities in the energy policies between the two states were the real cause. On the contrary, the energy relations between the two countries are contingent upon political developments and though the tensions on gas price predated the Armenian-Turkish rapprochement, the fact that the latter exacerbated tensions is undeniable. Turkey tried to use its role as the major consumer and the main transit route to achieve favorable terms in negotiations. Azerbaijan played its trump card, first signing a gas agreement with Russia, after manipulating the low prices of Azerbaijani gas. The crisis has pushed relations into a more realistic ground and was resolved with the Shah Deniz II agreement signed in June 2010. The energy crisis accompanied by political developments concerning the Armenian-Turkish normalization process displayed that the countries did not hesitate to use the leverage they possess to get what they want.

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Despite close energy relations, there is a significant gap between the actual and potential levels of economic relations in the non-energy realm. The intense development of energy relations and engagement in energy projects hindered the development of non-energy cooperation. Turkey has identified main shortcomings in the economic realm between the two countries: the immigration policy of Azerbaijan, visa regime and absence of a free trade agreement. Without a free trade agreement, Azerbaijan loses its attractiveness compared to the other post-Soviet countries and Russia particularly. As for the visa regime, Azerbaijan was reluctant as the abolition of the visa regime for Turkish citizens would trigger similar demands from Iran. However, with an agreement signed in February 2020, Turkey and Azerbaijan mutually abolished the visa regime for their citizens for a 90-day stay. Nevertheless, Azerbaijani immigration policy hinders employing Turkish citizens, and as Turkish businessmen see Azerbaijan as a “tribal state in which a small number of families control the political and economic levers of power”, business relations have not realized their potential. These issues also hinder the Turkish FDI in Azerbaijan despite them being the top investor. One the other hand, Azerbaijan is one of the top FDIs in the 2019 list of FDI countries with $565 million. Moreover, in 2013, SOCAR acquired the Star Media Group, which was comprised of a daily newspaper and two national TV channels. This helps Azerbaijan have a certain influence in Turkey and shape public perception on sensitive issues. In 2017, the SOCAR chairman Abdullayev announced at the World Petroleum

Congress that SOCAR would complete a $19.5 billion investment in Turkey. This was realized in 2019.88

One of the indicators of the economic relations between states is foreign trade. Turkey is Azerbaijan’s 3rd largest trade partner both in exports (after Italy and Israel) and imports (after UK and Russia) while Azerbaijan is not included both in export and import in the top 15 of Turkey.90 The level of trade turnover below the potential indicates the countries are much more interested in the energy sector, which leaves the trade in the non-energy realm underdeveloped. Nevertheless, the differences and difficulties in the economic relations are less vocal than the ones in politics and in the long-term these issues will become less challenging.

**Culture, Religion and Identity in Bilateral Relations**

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, secular Turkey became a model for Azerbaijan considering their common cultural and linguistic identity. However, there are significant cultural differences between Azerbaijan and Turkey despite their many similarities.

Thought religion has not played the most important role and has been a politicized issue in the dynamics of bilateral relations, independence from the Soviet Union galvanized a search for identity in Azerbaijan and Islam had to play an important role in this process.90 After Azerbaijan declared independence, the government’s official policy towards Islam was led by the highest Muslim authority in the country, the Muslim Board, which encouraged the emergence of a non-radical and non-political “special national brand of Islam.”91 Due to the post-Soviet religious gap in the country, Azerbaijan was subject to foreign influence in terms of religion from neighboring Iran, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and its closest ally Turkey. The Azerbaijani government saw the penetration of foreign influence as a threat and introduced regulations in its policy on

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91 Bedford, “Turkey and Azerbaijan,” 133.
religion. Thus, in 1996, the country adopted a Law on the Freedom of Religious Belief which prohibited religious propaganda by foreigners.\textsuperscript{92} However, Turkish movements enjoyed the Azerbaijani government support as Heydar Aliyev considered it a counterweight to radical Islam promoted by other Middle Eastern countries.\textsuperscript{93} Turkish influence in Azerbaijan penetrated in two main ways: governmental (Diyanet Isleri Baskanligi-Ministry of Religious Affairs of Turkey) and non-governmental (mostly Gülen movement).\textsuperscript{94} The most influential non-governmental channel of Turkish influence was the Gülen movement, named after its contemporary leader Fethullah Gülen. Though the movement endeavored to spread its ideology through secular institutions and media, and was mostly oriented towards educational networks (schools, gymnasiums, Qafqaz University) that helped to generate close sentiments towards Turkey among young Azerbaijanis and penetrate different strata of society.\textsuperscript{95} The AKP government in its turn enjoyed Fethullah Gülen’s global influence and used it as an effective foreign policy tool. However, the disruption between the government and the Gülen Movement in 2013 negatively affected its networks in Azerbaijan.\textsuperscript{96} Later, when Gülen was blamed for the July 2016 military coup attempt, the Azerbaijani government thoroughly supported Erdoğan and shut down its networks in the country. The soft power of Turkish religious influence in Azerbaijan significantly shrank. Thus, Ankara will have to provide a new equilibrium between religious and political influence as Turkey is losing its religious influence in Azerbaijan. Formerly, the Diyanet managed Turkish mosques and the Department of Religion at Baku State University. Yet, its management was passed to the state. Moreover, in 2010 new regulations in religion policy entailed that

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid, 136.
\textsuperscript{94} Fuad Aliyev, “Turkey’s Soft Power in Azerbaijan and the Gülen Movement,” in Religion And Soft Power In South Caucasus, ed. Ansgar Jödicke and Kornely Kakachia (Tbilisi, Georgian Institute of Politics, 2017), 41-49.
\textsuperscript{96} Aliyev, “Turkey’s Soft Power,”46.
only the citizens educated in Azerbaijan can conduct religious ceremonies and banned the exchange of clerics. The operation of Turkish mosques has never been welcomed as they are considered to inject and promote sectarian divides among the predominantly Shia population.97

The decline of Turkish religious influence in Azerbaijan has been also preconditioned by the fact that, after independence, Azerbaijan became more unobstructed in religious issues and the initial tolerance and coexistence of Sunnism and Shiism has become more difficult to provide. For instance, Turkish politicians were condemned for raising the issue of hijab in Azerbaijan in order not to polarise Azerbaijani society regarding this issue.98 U.S. diplomatic cables revealed Ilham Aliyev’s discontent with Gül’s and Erdoğan’s wives wearing headscarves. According to the cable, Turkey has been even included in a list of countries such as Iran, Saudi Arabia and some Gulf states that pose an Islamist threat to Azerbaijan.99

Another issue in the cultural aspect of bilateral relations has been language. Azerbaijan faces a challenge regarding its language as is so similar to the language of its more powerful ally that the distinctive qualities of the language may be difficult to preserve.100 A law enacted in 1992 declared the government language as “Turkish.” But the Azerbaijani constitution adopted in 1995 signified the “rebirth” of the Azerbaijani language seeking to protect it from external influences, including from Turkish.101 In 1991, the Azerbaijani Parliament adopted the Latin alphabet which generated huge debates with arguments that Azerbaijan would become more dependent on Turkey and that the Turkish language would absorb their language.102 The introduction of the Latin alphabet encouraged by Turkey increased the spread of Turkish and today Azerbaijan is more cautious about the preservation of Azerbaijani

98 Göksel, “Religiously-Inspired Bonding.”
99 WikiLeaks, “Azerbaijan-Turkey: Still One Nation, Two States?”
100 Safarova, “Azerbaijan Grapples.”
linguistic distinctiveness. Turkish television channels broadcasted in Azerbaijan, translated literature either into Turkish or Russian, studying at higher education institutions in Turkey, and attending Turkish schools in Azerbaijan has made the influence of the Turkish language even greater. In 2007, among foreign movies, only the Turkish ones had the privilege to be broadcasted in original, but the decision was reviewed and in 2012 the Turkish broadcastings were also dubbed. Moreover, a WikiLeaks cable revealed that Aliyev ordered the cessation of broadcasting Turkish soap operas as they were promoting an Islamist agenda as well as wearing headscarves. Moreover, some intellectuals in Azerbaijan promote the motto “my language is my existence.” Thus, there are Azerbaijani diplomats and military officials who are reluctant to speak with Turkish conjugations. Turkey displays a hierarchical approach to this issue and refers to the Azerbaijani language as a Turkish dialect that is sometimes neglected and defined as primitive. Azerbaijani are usually more eager to learn Turkish while in Turkey, whereas the Turks are reluctant even to use some Azerbaijani words while living in Azerbaijan. In this regard, Turkish human capital investments in Azerbaijan are also important in expanding the influence of the Turkish language. Besides establishing educational institutions in Azerbaijan, Turkey accepts thousands of Azerbaijani students with incentives that they will make up a Turkish-speaking stratum of society. The flow of Azerbaijani students reached about 15,500 in the 2017-2018 academic year, up from about 6,000 in 2016-2017. This is not comparable to the dozens of Turkish students in Azerbaijan comprising about one-tenth of

103 Mehdiyeva, *Power Games in the Caucasus*, 160.
104 Ibid, 153.
105 Safarova, “Azerbaijan Grapples.”
Azerbaijani students. Students leaving to study in Turkey also contribute to the ongoing brain drain in Azerbaijan as many students are reluctant to return. However, the analyzed issues display that cultural relations are not the core of the relations between Azerbaijan and Turkey. This sphere of relations is frequently influenced by the political developments between the two countries and has the potential to evolve and put bigger strains on their bilateral relations in the future.

Conclusion

After almost 30 years of engagement, the Azerbaijani-Turkish strategic partnership is an important foreign policy pillar for both countries. Despite the initial years of kinship and affinity, the later phases of relations are driven by the pragmatic national interests of the states. With their conservative Islamic leadership, Turkey has adopted a more moderate agenda for Azerbaijan, while the latter has increased its self-confidence due to hydrocarbon supplies and successful regional projects. These realities have modified Turkish-Azerbaijani relations that had been described as “One nation, two states.” The changing realities proved that despite the claimed ever-closer brotherhood, the pragmatic interests of the countries do not always coincide, though statesmen from both countries occasionally express support for each other. The purpose of this study was to discover multiple nuances and discrepancies that shape relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan. Among the main factors of bilateral relations, energy and transportation projects have been identified as a driving force. Cultural, historical and ethnic affinity should be considered as important determinants in bilateral relations, though they are sometimes subject to sensitive challenges. On the other hand, positive public perceptions and the government in power have an immense influence on shaping relations. However, contingencies in the political, economic and cultural realms have also been crucial determinants of bilateral relations, despite being underestimated. The research on political disagreements revealed that among all the issues discussed the possibility of the normalisation of Armenian-Turkish relations without considering

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the vital interests of Azerbaijan and neutral stance of Turkey during a possible war in NK may cause a crisis in almost every field of bilateral cooperation from energy issues to cultural ones. At the same time, this can also aggravate the other schisms present. In the case of other political issues, there is a certain positive/negative status quo whose development depends on a broader picture. The economic issues are not grave enough to provoke a massive shift in cooperation, though their solution will result in a significantly larger volume of transactions. The structural-cultural differences are more difficult to solve. However, these are contingent upon political developments. Thus, this study supports the following hypotheses. The pragmatic intentions and national interests of Turkey and Azerbaijan do not always coincide despite the rhetoric of “One nation, two states”, and the divergences in different spheres shape the dynamics of bilateral relations and can cause large shifts in relations.

Received June 10, 2020, Accepted August 17, 2020