

The New Turkish-Uzbek Relations in Post-Karimov Era

Uzbekistan occupies an important place in terms of regional peace and stability with its nearly 33 million population, geostrategic position, deep-rooted history, rich cultural values and economic potential. Turkey has kept close relations with Central Asian Turkic states because of linguistic, historical and cultural ties with the region. Turkey is the first country to have recognized the independence of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

Uzbekistan's native populations are predominantly ethnically Turkic. The cultural ties between Turkey and Uzbekistan are based on a common history, religious belief and practices, linguistic, cultural and traditional commonalities. In addition to cultural links, energy and security remain one of the top priorities for Ankara's strategy in the energy-rich but economically undeveloped region.

But tensions between Turkey and Uzbekistan remained on top under late-president Islam Karimov, who is infamously known for his repressive and dictatorial policies and for his intolerance for political opposition, having cracked down on civil and human rights' groups as well as independent media outlets.

To give some examples of political intension during the reign of Karimov:

In 1999, Tashkent accused many people including Turkish citizens of being among those who attempted to assassinate late-President Karimov. Political dissents were immediately blamed for the attacks, several hundred people were arrested. The Supreme Court of Uzbekistan has sentenced six people to death and 16 others to long prison terms as the court case lasted for over three weeks. Some opponents were extradited from Turkey, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Human rights groups have expressed concern that some of the confessions on which the prosecution's case was based have been extracted under torture.

In 1993, Turkey provided a safe haven for Uzbek opposition leader Muhammed Salih, who had run against Islam Karimov in the 1991 presidential elections, securing about 12,7 percent of votes. Although Salih was forced to leave Turkey due to pressure from Tashkent, Uzbek officials accused Turkey of meddling internal affairs of Uzbekistan as Turkey was hosting several opposition and anti-regime political leaders.

The shaky Turkish-Uzbek relations took a dramatic turn after the Andijan massacre in 2005, which has provoked an international outcry. The Turkish government was indicative during the UN resolution condemning Uzbekistan's human rights record over mass killings, continuing at a low level in relations between Ankara and Tashkent. Uzbekistan responded by refusing to attend meetings of Turkic-speaking leaders and preventing then-President Abdullah Gül from visiting Uzbekistan to political pressure.

In 2011, the Turkish government was once again put under pressure from the Uzbek government. Tashkent accused Turkish businesses of supporting so-called religious extremists, who were supposedly spreading 'radical Islamic ideas'. Uzbek security forces directly targeted Turkish companies as Uzbek state television blamed them of supporting 'radical Islamic ideas'.

Despite the fact that various communication channels remained closed during the reign of Islam Karimov, Turkey took a step to normalize relations with Uzbekistan. After a long time, the first high-level meeting between both countries took place during the 2014 Sochi Olympics, when then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has taken steps in normalizing relations by meeting Karimov. After this meeting, Turkey once again appointed an ambassador in Tashkent. This meeting was followed by a visit to Uzbekistan by the then-minister for Foreign Affairs, Ahmet Davutoğlu, in July 2014.

Shavkat Mirziyoyev became Uzbekistan's president on December 14, 2016, after the death of former President Islam Karimov.

Meanwhile, on July 15, 2016, Gülenist Terror Group (FETÖ), which is led by the Fethullah Gülen,

attempted to topple the government, the U.S. still continues to keep and protect the main coup plotter Fethullah Gülen. It was a paradigm-changing development for Turkey. Turkish officials think the attempted coup was not simply carried out by local elements, but also supported by outside actors, and not just supported, but directly by them. Additionally, the support of the U.S. to the PKK-affiliated People's Protection Units (YPG) in Syria undermined the unsteady Turkish-U.S. relations.

Turkey's Western allies turned a blind eye to Ankara's vital interests with backing terror groups such as FETÖ and PKK-affiliated YPG. It has been very hard to explain to the Turkish public have effectively compelled to Ankara to focus on alternative cooperation in the international arena.

Ankara is not categorically leaving the Western alliance or joining into a Eurasian alliance. Ankara is rightly following a pragmatic, flexible and adaptive foreign policy line to maximize its national interests in conjunction with rapidly changing regional dynamics.

In 2016, Turkish President Erdoğan made a historic official visit to Uzbekistan. This was the first visit for 16 years, it marked another step in cooperation between the two countries and following the visit, Erdoğan announced that Turkey was considering membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), an economic, political, and security organization. Member states include Central Asian states, among others Uzbekistan as well as China and Russia.

During Mirziyoyev's presidential campaign, he promised increasing accountability to Uzbek citizens, acknowledging the lack of reform in key aspects of Uzbek society, including the criminal justice system, vowing to take positive steps for reform during his first year in office.

Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev paid a high-level official visit to Turkey on October 25-27, 2017. This was the first visit to Turkey of an Uzbek leader since 1999. After two decades, Ankara and Tashkent aim to repair ruined ties under the late Uzbek President Islam Karimov.

At the joint press conference at the Presidential Palace in Ankara, Mirziyoyev said: "This 20-year break is already seen in our eyes, showing how much we have missed each other, the fact that we are understanding each other without pronouncing a word just by looking to each other's eyes means really a lot." Turkish President Erdoğan describes the historic visit as 'very meaningful'.

With Mirziyoyev's coming into office, Turkey will play a significant role in the liberalization of Uzbek economy which too was in isolation during the Karimov era.

Uzbek President described Turkey as an important and trustworthy partner of Uzbekistan, underlined that they are ready to mobilize their every means and resources to strengthen the cooperation between the brotherly peoples of Turkey and Uzbekistan.

According to Turkish Foreign Ministry, there are currently 700 companies in Uzbekistan with Turkish capital, 100 of which are representation offices. They carry out activities in the sectors of textile, food, hotel management, building materials, plastic, medication and service. There are 114 companies in Turkey with Uzbek capital.

Uzbekistan is the 7th biggest natural gas, 4th biggest uranium and 6th biggest cotton producer as well as the 2nd biggest cotton exporter of the world.

Despite these figures, Turkish President Erdoğan underlined that Mirziyoyev's leadership is making enormous progress, adding trade turnover between Uzbekistan and Turkey is not at the desired level, with about \$1,3 billion in 2016 but that \$900 million has already been exceeded in January-September 2017. A goal was set to increase to \$5 billion in five years and to \$10 billion in 10 years.

During the Uzbek President Mirziyoyev's historic official visit, \$3.5 billion worth of deals were signed over 35 joint projects in the construction of power facilities and road infrastructure, manufacture of textiles, electrical equipment, building materials, food and agro-industry, logistics centers at Uzbekistan-Turkey

Business Forum which held for a third time this year.

Regarding the ongoing economic reforms in Uzbekistan, Turkish businessmen stressing the liberalization of the foreign exchange system and simplification of visa procedures have expanded opportunities for cooperation. Also, Turkish Business Center will be set up in Tashkent to develop bilateral cooperation.

As non-governmental foreign-based organizations including FETÖ-affiliated institutions are closed by the Uzbek authorities in 2001, the existence of Turkish official institutions in Uzbekistan paved the way for the development of Turkish-Uzbek relations. The Turkish International Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) has the best experience and strongest institutional links in Central Asia so the agency's activities may open a new phase with the better institutional capacities in Uzbekistan. In Uzbekistan, the Presidency for Turks and Related Communities (YTB) mainly works closely with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Directorate of Religious Affairs, TİKA, The Council of Higher Education (YÖK), The Yunus Emre Institute, the Public Diplomacy Office, and other institutions and organizations. Other Turkish institutions including Turkish NGOs may conduct their activities with the cooperation of Turkish official institutions.

Uzbek President Mirziyoyev also stated that visa procedure has been simplified for Turkish citizens to improve relations between the two countries adding that gradually "visa-free days" will one day become a reality.

Also, regarding the common cultural heritage, Turkish President Erdoğan stressed that Uzbekistan is home to very important cultural heritage and cities such as Samarkand and Bukhara valuable for Turkic culture and Muslim world. Turkish Airlines (THY) will launch regular flight from Istanbul to Samarkand starting from March 16, 2018.

In conclusion, a new era in Turkish-Uzbek relations begins between two countries as Turkish President Erdoğan and his Uzbek counterpart Mirziyoyev meet in historic official visit after decades.

As Turkey's Western allies turned a blind eye to Ankara's vital interests, Ankara is not categorically leaving the Western alliance or joining into a Eurasian alliance. Ankara is rightly following a pragmatic foreign policy to maximize its national interests like the renovation of ties with Uzbekistan.

With the clearing of FETÖ threat in Uzbekistan in 2001, Turkish official institutions and NGOs should increase its efficiency via cooperation with other institutions in Uzbekistan. Turkish institutions' cooperation with local and international institutions gives an important momentum for Ankara's presence within the region.

With the deepened Turkish-Uzbek cooperation based on a common history, religious practices, language, culture and traditions would serve both two countries to build a long-awaited steady relationship.