

IN SEARCH OF TURKIC IDENTITY

Today the Turkic world lacks an ideology and identity that could serve as a strong foundation if the political will to establish a unified entity were to come about. Turkic leaders should give serious thought to the development of such an ideology and identity. Over the past few decades Turkic societies have lived under widely different political systems. A strong ideology could bring together these disparate groups and foster the development of a Turkic identity. A strong sense of shared identity is necessary to build a future Turkic economic and/or political union. This paper offers a logic to go in this direction and recommendations to this end.

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In the era of globalization, it is natural that mergers take place. In the business world, the phenomenon occurs to maximize benefit; in the political world (for example, the European Union), it happens to allow for greater political activity and to exert influence with the purpose of protecting certain values and life-styles and extracting economic benefits. Countries with different languages, cultures, religions, and history are coalescing into various organizations to further their interests. It is for this reason that countries and peoples with a similar religion, languages, cultures, and history –the Turkic countries and peoples– should consider uniting to defend themselves from external challenges and to have a larger say in world politics.

The challenges the region faces are also global in nature, such as terrorism and religious extremism. Geopolitics is especially important in Eurasia –an area that embraces all the Turkic nations and surrounded by such important world actors like China, Iran, Pakistan, India, and Europe. Eurasia has always been a theater of major political games as well as cultures and identities that are on the brink of being washed away under the influence of globalization.

Close and coordinated interaction between the Turkic nations with some form of unification would be beneficial to protect from these challenges. This will also allow for Turkic countries to take advantage of the growing dependency of powerful states on oil and gas, which the Turkish countries possess, and ensure that the cultural effects of globalization do not estrange them from each other.

Is such a unity possible today? This paper argues that it is possible, but not until a strong common ideology is developed to convince Turkic peoples of the idea that unity is in their interest. This paper notes that Turkic peoples currently have a weak Turkic identity that is superseded by regional (European for Turks in Turkey; post-Soviet or Central Asian for the nations of the Eurasian region), national (Uzbek, Kazakh, or Turkish), religious (Muslim) and/or clan identities, and offers recommendations on strengthening the Turkic identity - a foundation upon which unity may be built.

The young Turkic nations of the former Soviet Union are today preoccupied with developing their own ideologies and identities. Some, like Azerbaijan, are more active in promoting and stressing the importance of Turkicness (or Turkism)¹. This may be due to the fact that Azerbaijan is geographically close to Turkey, which is home to the largest and most developed of all Turkic peoples. Azerbaijan may also view the Turkic identity as a unifying factor that can be beneficial in addressing its territorial and security problems with neighboring Armenia. Other nations, like Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, considered the least

¹ Ilham Aliiev of Azerbaijan participates in almost all larger Turkic gatherings whereas Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan would send no one or some low ranking government official. Fresh example is the last Turkic summit in Turkey where Uzbekistan participated in preparation for it but didn't take part in the summit itself for two reasons: it did not want the summit to be politicized and the Karabakh issue to be included in the final statement; Uzbekistan was not also happy with Turkey's vote in the UN's 3rd committee against Uzbekistan's human rights record.

democratic of all Turkic nations, are developing ideologies and identities around their regimes to secure their continued existence.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Turkic nations of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan found themselves in an ideological void. With no replacement to communism, they experimented with ideologies they had had before the Soviets –pan-Turkism, pan-Islamism, and regionalism. Turkey, under President Özal, took initiatives to further unity among Turkic states, Islamic groups from the Middle East actively promoted their versions of Islam and regional clans struggled for power. Eventually, the sense of national statehood which had been imposed upon these societies was embraced and rediscovered. Histories began anew with some nations focusing on their own greatness. Nationalism based on being, for example, an Uzbek, was rejuvenated. In a sense, new ethnicities were created within national borders.

The Turkic nations' histories lack a common base –a Turkic legacy that could help strengthen existing bonds. If the goal is to develop unity, these nations should establish a common legacy, instead of creating artificial identities, by appropriating notable historic individuals who may never even have belonged to the particular ethnic group in question. Emphasizing inter-ethnic differences causes confusion and exacerbates the mutual mistrust acquired since their independence from the Soviet Union.

Many ordinary Turkic peoples dream of unity and the power they envision can come with it. Some consider it a utopian vision, some hold greater allegiance to their religion or their nation than to a Turkic identity, yet others cannot imagine a Turkic legacy because of their leaders' absence of vision and lack of cohesion.

The major obstacle towards a Turkic unity does not lie with the unwillingness of the people, but rather with the absence of political will in independent Turkic states. As long as such a will is absent among the Turkic states themselves, the Turkic peoples who live in Southern Iran, Western China, Northern Afghanistan, and various parts of Russia can hardly expect future unification. Some of the Turkic peoples of non-Turkic countries feel more allegiance to their home state, however, some who live under bad conditions may consider finding ways to join their kins if the Turkic world were more unified.

In the past 15 years, despite attempts to build closer and stronger ties, no significant advances have been made in achieving Turkic unity. One possible exception has been the introduction of the Latin alphabet in Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, with Kazakhstan soon to join. This failure is largely due to the lack of cohesion and inability to develop a common Turkic ideology and to promote the Turkic identity.

Only Turkey, Azerbaijan and, to some extent, Kazakhstan have actively promoted Turkism. Turkmenistan did not bother to be part of any associations and

has been passive with regards to joining both Turkic and other initiatives, such as the CIS. With Saparmurad Niyazov's death, however, Turkmenistan may prefer a different foreign policy. Kyrgyzstan, the most vulnerable state in the region—both economically and politically—has been particularly careful not to jeopardize its sovereignty, protecting itself from getting too much under the influence of any of the more powerful states in the region. The regime in Uzbekistan has chosen to take an independent path, balancing its relations with countries like the U.S. and Russia as well as the ideological power of Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Iran, to prolong the existing regime.

There are *three patterns* the Turkic nations could use to proceed towards unity in the future: the European, the Soviet, and the combination of the former two mixed with additional original elements.

The first pattern has been used by the European Union, which has certain requirements most members of the Turkic world don't yet satisfy: Economic governance and democracy. Only Turkey meets these requirements. Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan have focused on actively exploiting their energy riches. Democracy has taken a back seat to economic development.

This first pattern requires no common history, language, culture, or even religion (Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox Christians are often referred to as members of distinct religions). Even alphabets can be different (Latin, Cyrillic, and Greek). With each country enjoying equal rights, no member of the European Union claims a sole leadership role in the organization. With ongoing implicit competition between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan for regional dominance, the EU example offers equal relationships.

The second pattern is that which was practiced by the Soviet system from which five of the six independent Turkic nations emerged as nation-states. The powerful Soviet ideology and identity formed a super-power but was short-lived due to several factors. Unlike the European Union where membership and secession are voluntary, the Soviet system was forced upon Turkic peoples and leaving the union was *de facto* impossible, despite being allowed by the Constitution.² Communism rejected any religion, because it was itself an ideology. The Soviet system in practice was not democratic and was thus vulnerable to freedom of speech. On the other hand, the tools for spreading ideology through ethical, cultural, and patriotic education were impressive.

The Soviet pattern works for a union that is centered and controlled by a dominant group. Turkey's Turks could theoretically claim such a position in the Turkic world but it is unlikely that they would be as effective as Russia and the Russians were in the Soviet Union. Having rid themselves of a "big brother" with the collapse of the Soviet Union, former Soviet Turkic nations are reluctant to submit themselves to a new big brother, which Turkey tried to be in early 1990s.

² In accordance with Article 72 of the Soviet Constitution adopted in 1977, each republic retained the right to secede from the USSR. It was used only in 1991 when the central government lost its control.

The third pattern the Turkic world could use is a symbiosis of the abovementioned patterns with the addition of unique elements. Although the Turkic peoples blame Russia for a missed chance to bring about a unified Turkistan when the Bolsheviks crushed a short-lived Turkistan Autonomous Republic in 1918³, it should also be acknowledged that the Soviets successfully produced a powerful uniting ideology. The Turkic peoples should develop an ideology that will last far longer than the Soviet one. The EU model can provide a Turkic union with management tools, as this was an area in which the Soviet apparatus proved ineffective.

The third, mixed pattern could help the world's Turks build their ideology and reanimate their identity based on their rich historic past. Although it is true that history has never seen all Turks unite into one single nation, the same previously could be said for Europe, yet it did not prevent the European Union from becoming a reality. The absence of a unified Turkic political establishment in history therefore should not discourage Turkic peoples from drawing together.

As long as there is no single Turkic language spoken throughout the Turkic world, it may be hard to see the Turks unite. A common language may serve as a uniting factor and many languages may be divisive. It is unlikely, however, that any Turkic nation would give up its language voluntarily in favor of another, supposedly, a common one. No matter how close Turkic languages may be, individually, each of them is unique to their native speakers. One could turn to the Soviet experience and demonstrate that an alien language such as Russian could successfully replace the native languages in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. One should bear in mind that Russian was forced upon them. The European example shows that for a supra-national entity to be created, a common language is not required. If it were to evolve naturally, then it could, but need not.

If much is accomplished towards developing a common ideology and identity along cultural, educational, and economic lines among the Turkic peoples, the importance of a common language may be realized by the Turkic peoples over time and its adoption may be a less painful process. The European example, however, shows that language is still not the most important factor in integration.

Turkic nations can move forward in the quest for unity by either establishing a supra-national authority like the EU or by imposing a union with a strong central authority as the Soviets did. Since the days of subjugation and colonization are in the past, Turkic peoples can learn much from the EU experience of putting a structure together.

³ Following the Russian Revolution, on 11 December 1917 Muslims in Kokand declared themselves autonomous announced by taking the Soviet promise of self-determination at face value. But the autonomy was short-lived. On 18 February 1918, the Red Army crushed the local government and massacred 14,000 people. James Erwin, Footnotes to History, <http://www.buckyogi.com/footnotes/index.htm>

What Needs to be Done to Achieve a Solid Turkic Ideology and Identity?

While the Turkic peoples never had a unified state or kingdom before, there were many kingdoms and states governed by different rulers of Turkic ethnicity that greatly contributed to the development of human civilization. If today's Turkic leaders realize this and incorporate it into their identity, they would have made a big step towards a common Turkic identity. A universal history textbook about the Turks taught at high-schools and colleges throughout Turkic countries would provide such an opportunity. The realization of the achievements of the Turkic world combined, as opposed to just one individual Turkic group, would add to their pride, self-respect, and confidence –all products of an ideology and factors of a larger identity.

Instead of praising their own history and historic figures, both of which are at times in conflict with the claims of other groups, each individual Turkic nation could benefit from a unified history – significant historic events and historic figures, all of whom belong to the joint history. Instead of appropriating certain portions of the Turkic legacy and history as theirs, individual Turkic groups could strengthen bonds among themselves by promoting a common Turkic legacy. For example, instead of making the 14th century mega-ruler Amir Timur or the founder of the Great Moghul Empire in India Babur-Shakh an Uzbek, making them –as well as Farabi, Abay, Nizami, al-Bukhari, and Fuzuli Turkic– would enrich the Turkic legacy and contribute to strengthening of a Turkic identity and ideology.

This would also provide a more accurate history and would put an end to endless and senseless historic arguments among scholars and citizens of various Turkic groups. Such arguments only contribute to an ideological divide. In this regard, the Sovietization experience would be useful to learn from. Soviet ideology incorporated every success story during its existence into the common Soviet history and left the pre-Soviet period to its rightful owners. For example, Uzbeks living in the Soviet Union could call the first man in space, Yuri Gagarin their cosmonaut or could claim the Olympic victories of many non-Uzbek, Soviet athletes as theirs. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, though, the “copyrights” on these achievements have expired. The only Turkic cosmonaut, Salizhan Sharipov, can hardly be called Uzbek or Kyrgyz. Although he was born in Kyrgyzstan to an Uzbek family, he represents Russia during his missions and speaks Russian better than Uzbek or Kyrgyz. Calling him a Turkic cosmonaut would make all Turkic groups proud of him and would spare many Uzbek and Kyrgyz fans from ceaseless arguments.

But while the Soviet identity, imposed on nations with different religious background, language, culture and history, was artificial, the Turkic identity has had a centuries-old history. Many Turkic kingdoms and rulers referred to themselves as Turks including Amir Temur, especially in their struggle against Persians.

The geographic terms of Turan and Turkistan were replaced with the term “Central Asia” as the powerful Soviet ideology and identity emerged, just as Chinese ideology attempts to replace the term “East Turkistan” with Xinjiang or Sinkiang, which Uyghurs find very insulting. To awaken the Turkic identity, the terms so sacred to this very identity must be revived by the Turkic intelligentsia –writers, journalists, poets, and thinkers. The historic terms “Turkistan” and “Turan” would give Turkic peoples the sense of belonging to the renowned Turkic legacy. The more frequently they are used today to mean the Turkic world, the sooner its people will become accustomed to them and will find that bridge between who they are (Turks or Turkic peoples) and where they come from (Turan/Turkistan –the Land of Turks).

In order to instill a stronger Turkic identity in modern-day Turkic peoples, the achievements of the past, the present potential, and a larger picture for the future should be studied, analyzed, combined, and promoted among the Turkic peoples. If they realize and are taught their historical achievements and the potential geopolitical strength they possess, they would be likely to strive for that kind of an identity.

Turks have dominated Eurasia for nearly a millennium, expanding their territories through various powerful kingdoms –the Huns, the Timurids, the Ottomans, the Great Moghul Empire. Turks and those earlier ethnic groups that existed in current Turkic territories and were later assimilated into Turkic groups contributed many discoveries to world science in algebra and mathematics (Al-Kwarizmi and Biruni), astronomy (Ulughbek), medicine (Avicenna) and others. Today the combined population of the Turkic peoples in the world is between 180 to 200 million. Economically, they possess large oil (Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan) and gas reserves (Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) and are located conveniently to transport and transit natural resources to Europe, China, Pakistan and India.⁴ All this can be claimed fully by someone who acknowledges his or her Turkic identity and not just current national identity.

Ideology is reinforced by success. The Turkic peoples should play a larger role in religious affairs worldwide realizing that it was the Turks who spread Islam westward and it was the theologians from their part of the world –Imam al-Bukhari, Baha-ud-Din Naqshbandi, Abu-Nasr al-Farabi, Rumi, and Hakim at-Termizi who greatly contributed to Islamic philosophy.

Areas dominated by Turkic kingdoms have practiced religious tolerance and ethnic diversity. Whether in the Golden Horde, the Timurid kingdoms, the Ottoman Empire, or the Great Moghul Empire in India, non-Muslims and non-Turks were always comfortable with preserving their identity and religion.

⁴ According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, the independent Turkic states possess around 60-70 billion barrels of oil and 200-250 trillion cubic feet of gas reserves, <http://www.eia.doe.gov>, September 2006.

Analyzing the political situation in the world today, it becomes apparent that Turkic peoples do not belong to the category of the most radical Muslims of our times. No Turkic nation is currently involved in a regional conflict (with Nagorno-Karabakh having turned into a frozen conflict) and none of them have been accused of harboring, training and financing terrorists. Only a very small number of individuals accused of ties to international terrorism or to al-Qaeda is of Turkic descent. A stereotype of an Islamic radical is associated more with Arabs, Iranians, Afghans and Pakistanis. All of this could be a good educational and consolidating ideology for modern Turks in their attempt to develop a common identity.

Although Islam has no hierarchy like Catholicism, a centralized religious authority for Turkic nations like SADUM [Central Asian Spiritual Board of Muslims] in the Soviet Union, would be a great ideological tool in bringing Turkic peoples together based on religion and keeping away outside dogmas like Wahhabism.

Such an establishment could be run by a mufti from each Turkic nation on a rotational basis or by a board of muftis. By recognizing the legitimacy of a single Turkic Islamic institution, Turkic governments, in addition to bringing their peoples together, could also better regulate religious affairs and prevent illegal groups perceived as a threat from spreading their ideology.

Constant exchange of information is an important element of promoting a Turkic ideology among Turkic countries. The absence of news exchange is creating misunderstanding and misperceptions among the Turkic peoples about each other and is giving way to other, sometimes conflicting ideas. The more Turkic peoples know about each other's lives, economies, cultures, and politics, the stronger the bonds they will develop. Turkic TV and radio broadcasts as well as print press should be launched and reporters from different Turkic states should work together. A news agency specializing only in Turkic affairs and reporting in key Turkic languages would help close the information vacuum. Such an agency would also be effective in countering information attacks and provocations against the Turkic countries whether it concerns the Armenian claim about genocide, the issue of Karabakh, Russian media's attempts to sow division, and other problems that may arise. The example and impact of TASS news agency in the Soviet Union is a good example of how centralized delivery of information can help shape policy.

Serious attention should be paid to young professionals and intellectuals in Turkic countries, because they are the ones who will one day hold power in their countries. A series of leadership training sessions and joint exchange programs with an emphasis on Turkic unity among specialists in various fields, and assistance in maintaining their professional network would help educate like-minded Turkic technocrats.

The establishment of a university for Turkic students with certain quotas for every country in which Turks live would help nurture a sense of solidarity and unity. Such a university could play an important role, as some of the university's students may hold important positions in their governments in the future, and the relationships they form would help bring the goal of uniting Turkic people even closer. The university would also give its students a better idea of mutual problems and would work on projects aimed at resolving those problems jointly. This was a policy in the Soviet Union. By accepting students from all over the USSR into leading educational establishments based on the notion of "peoples' friendship", the Soviets promoted the Soviet identity, though pretty much based and centered on Russian culture and acknowledgment of Russians' leading role. Sending conscripts to serve in the Soviet army to places outside of their republics was also part of this policy.

The idea of Turkic unity could even be advanced to the point of establishing a foreign ministers council like the European Council which would develop a common foreign policy strategy for the Turkic states on key international and regional issues. A major Turkic think-tank institution with political scientists from various Turkic states would conduct research and publish reports solely on Turkic affairs, Turkic countries' relationships with each other and with the outside world, as well as on the political, economic, environmental, and social issues within Turkic societies.

The power of sports as a uniting factor should also be used to nourish the sense of Turkic unity. Turkic Games, very much like Olympic Games or Asian Games, should be introduced for participation by not only athletes from the Turkic states, but also Turkic regions of non-Turkic states like Russia, Iran, China, Cyprus, Bulgaria, Hungary, and others. Popular music and film festivals and other cultural projects would also help shape the Turkic identity and ideology.

Most importantly, however, Turkic governments should coordinate their policies by rewriting and systemizing their histories and underlining accomplishments of the Turks. While each Turkic nation learns its history, Turkic scholars should also develop the history of the world's Turks to be taught at secondary schools and universities, with famous Turkic scholars, statesmen, religious scholars, poets and writers in those books being referred to as Turkic and not as Anatolian Turks, Uzbeks, Turkmens, or Kazakhs.

Conclusion

Although most of the nearly 200 million Turkic people around the world have a favorable attitude towards a Turkic unity, the phenomenon lacks a solid ideology that would develop a strong common Turkic identity –an important factor in bringing Turkic peoples together. This paper provides some policy recommendations on developing the ideology and identity. However, the biggest problem

today in achieving these goals and in implementing these ideas in the Turkic world is the absence of political will and political desire for closer relations. The Turkic leaders of Turkey, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan who view Turkic unity not as a utopian ideal, but as a feasible goal, can start implementing these ideas today. As time goes by and new leaders with new thinking and understanding of the need for unity come to power in other Turkic states, they will be able to join the club.

Some claim that Turkic unity is a utopian fantasy just as many people did not believe Europe could unite to the degree it did. Turkic unity is not a utopian idea however, it is a dream and some dreams, if enough effort is invested, come true.