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Internal

Turkey-Azerbaijan Tensions Reflect Need for More Parity between Ankara and Baku in Middle Corridor Partnership

Michael Tanchum

The strategic partnership between Turkey and Azerbaijan is experiencing its most severe strain since Ankara and Baku signed their strategic partnership agreement in 2010. The tensions have been unprecedented, both in their public nature and the vehemence of the recriminations that Baku has expressed toward Ankara. Erupting over the course of October 2026 ostensibly as a 'spat' over Azerbaijan's ban on hijabs in public schools, Baku has viewed the matter as reflecting a wider disregard for Azerbaijani sovereignty in its domestic affairs and its autonomy in foreign affairs. The matter has serious implications for Turkey's strategic interests in the Middle Corridor and the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) as Azerbaijan forms the geographic link between Turkey and the Central Asian republics. The growing strength and increasing depth of Azerbaijan's international partnerships will require Ankara to conduct its own relationship with Baku with greater parity.

BACKGROUND: On September 21, 2026, the Azerbaijani government amended its regulations concerning school uniforms in public schools to prohibit "additional elements of clothing that violate the uniform requirements for school uniforms and contradict the principle of secular education." The amended regulations were in accordance with the Azerbaijani constitution, which proclaims the secular nature of the state, with Article 18 explicitly affirming the secular nature of public education. Although no specific elements of clothing were listed in the amended regulations, public complaints began emerging in early October that some schools were barring female students and teachers wearing hijabs (traditional Muslim headscarf) from entering schools. Protests by affected students and their families were joined by teachers, religious leaders, and other public figures. When protestors started damaging the schools and the property of school administrators, the government stepped in to restore order and filed criminal cases against the protesters.

Several officials of Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) criticized the Azerbaijani public school dress code banning hijabs. Foremost among these was Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's advisor Oktay Saral who publicly posted on social media on October 12: "Leaving a student who covers her head for reasons of faith at the school gate – how can this fit into any conscience, any sense of justice?" Ankara was taken aback by the vehemence of the official Azerbaijani reaction.

The ruling Yeni Azerbaijan Party described criticism from Saral and AKP parliament members as "systematic and openly slanderous" and "populist and irresponsible statements without taking account of the issue." The statement from Azerbaijan's ruling party also declared the statements by Saral and other officials "contradict the spirit of Azerbaijani-Turkish fraternal relations and can serve to create artificial tensions at the societal level." AKP-affiliated organizations have an outsized presence in Azerbaijani social media, leading to longtime concerns among some analysts within the wider Azerbaijani policy community to be concerned about Ankara undermining Azerbaijani sovereignty through popular mobilization.

The public crisis revealed deeper structural tensions in Turkey-Azerbaijan relationship, which for decades has been touted from both sides with the slogan "One nation, two states." On October 19, Azerbaijan issued arrest warrants in absentia for seven social media influencers and internet journalists operating in Turkey and placing the seven accused on an international wanted list. The Prosecutor General's Office of the Republic of Azerbaijan, according to Azerbaijani media reports, claimed that the accused "used social media and internet platforms to disseminate materials calling for the violent overthrow of the constitutional order and the seizure of state power in Azerbaijan, as well as violence, incitement of religious hatred, and enmity based on religious radicalism."

IMPLICATIONS: The strategic partnership between Turkey and Azerbaijan is experiencing its most severe strain since Ankara and Baku signed their strategic partnership agreement in 2010. That agreement catalyzed the construction of the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) and the Baku-Tblisi-Kars (BTK) railway and other key infrastructure projects during the 2010s that serve as the foundation of the Middle Corridor – a commercial trade route connecting China and Central Asia to Europe via Azerbaijan and Turkey. For Azerbaijan, the corridor's construction was essential for creating international stakeholder interest in the preservation of Azerbaijani sovereignty in the face of threats from the Russian Federation and the Islamic Republic of Iran. It also bolstered Azerbaijan's international clout as Baku sought to regain the Karabakh territory it had lost to Armenia. Ankara and Baku concomitantly deepened their defense relationship during the 2010s, which eventually saw Azerbaijan recover its territories through a 2020 military victory over Armenia, enabled by an unprecedented level of Turkish military assistance.

For Turkey, its economic and defense relationship with Azerbaijan formed a strategic linchpin of the country's post-Cold War geopolitical ambitions under the two and half decade rule of the AKP. In moving beyond Turkey's Cold War framework, President Erdoğan has been guided for over two decades by the strategic goal of transforming Turkey into an interregional power that will set the terms for a new pattern of connectivity between Europe, Africa and Asia. Ankara and Baku's construction of the Middle Corridor's Turkey-to-Azerbaijan link and the 2020 military victory over Armenia changed the rules of the game in the South Caucasus, upending the geopolitics of Europe-to-Central Asia and China

commerce and resulting in the elevation of Turkey from a transit state to one of the principal agenda-setters of Eurasian connectivity.

In 2021, following the military victory, Ankara restructured the Turkey-led Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States, renaming it the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). As the first among the Turkic nations to be an independent state in the modern era, Turkey considers itself as the 'elder brother' of the other Turkic nations which achieved their independence in the 1990s with the collapse of the Soviet Union. With the largest population and largest army, Turkey also views itself as the natural leader of the OTS. The Erdoğan government seeks to mold the organization into an international bloc after its own image and policy orientation. In 2022, Ankara secured the admission of the internationally unrecognized Turkish Republic of North Cyprus as an observer member in 2022. In 2023 Erdoğan declared at the OTS Summit, "We will work shoulder to shoulder to make the coming period the era of the Turks by extending *our vision* [emphasis added] of the 'Turkish Century' to the Organization of Turkic States."

In 2025, the Turkish Ministry of Education officially replaced the term "Central Asia" with the term "Turkestan" across its entire educational curriculum. The change reflects President Erdoğan's "Century of Türkiye" vision, which he reiterated in his October 29, 2025 speech marking the 102nd anniversary of the founding of the Turkish Republic – a vision of Turkish international leadership that Erdoğan explicitly seeks to extend to the OTS with the ambition to influence the societies of Azerbaijan and the Central Asian republics to conform with religio-social norms the AKP. One year later, the AKP's overreach into Azerbaijani domestic and foreign affairs resulted in President Aliyev refusing to attend the October 29-30 Organization of Turkic States (OTS) summit in Ankara.

Ankara needs to recognize that after the 2020 Karabakh War Turkey no longer can treat Baku as the 'little brother' in their strategic relationship, despite Turkey's significant military assistance in helping Azerbaijan to secure its victory. Baku also received critical military assistance from Israel during the war and the continuation of the robust Azerbaijani-Israeli strategic partnership, including Azerbaijan's incorporation into a wider Abraham Accords framework, provides Baku with another policy tool to preserve its strategic autonomy.

Moreover, Azerbaijan's recovery of its territory has increased Baku's geopolitical clout, transforming how Azerbaijan pursues its national interests through a multi-vectored foreign policy. Azerbaijan is pursuing peace with Armenia with Washington's involvement, enhancing Baku's position vis-à-vis Moscow as Russia continues to be consumed with its war in Ukraine. Baku also perceives Beijing to have a deepening stake in Azerbaijani sovereignty, a perception supported by growing Sino-Azerbaijani cooperation in developing the logistics of the Middle Corridor. As tensions with Turkey unfolded, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Baku on October 14.

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CONCLUSIONS: The current strain between Ankara and Baku reveals an underlying structural tension in the strategic partnership between Turkey and Azerbaijan, and symbolic gestures from Ankara won't smooth over the breach. Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev made the stakes clear by his refusal to personally attend the OTS summit in Ankara in October. Even though Erdoğan forced his advisor Oktay Saral to resign four days before the summit, Aliyev still refused to attend. The immediate public aspect of the crisis was defused with Erdoğan's November 8 visit to Azerbaijan for Victory Day, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Aliyev in Shusha, whose capture marks Azerbaijan's victory in the Karabakh War.

While the two presidents praised the Turkish-Azerbaijani partnership and affirmed its enduring nature, Ankara will need to recalibrate its approach to Baku. A telling sign of this new reality came on the next day, November 9, 2026 – not in Shusha, but in Shanghai – when the State Oil Company of the Azerbaijan Republic (SOCAR) signed a Memorandum of Understanding on strategic cooperation with Chinese state oil and chemical giant Sinopec. The growing strength and increasing depth of Azerbaijan's international partnerships will require Ankara to conduct its own relationship with Baku with greater parity.

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