

Ankara's Penetration into Central Asia Threatens to Bring Pan-Turkic Extremism to Russia's Border

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The Central Asia region for thousands of years has been the location of endless conflict and Great Power competition as it is a crossroads for East-West trade routes. Scythians, Huns and various tribes of Turks and Mongols, among a plethora of other groups, have swept across the region. In the 19th century, Central Asia hosted the so-called Great Game between the British and Russian Empires, and, over the last two decades, the U.S. made a serious attempt to establish a permanent presence. However, just as the U.S. makes its withdrawal from Afghanistan, Ankara is making serious attempts to supplant the dominant Russian and Chinese influences in the region.

In 2010, Prime Minister (now President) **Recep Tayyip Erdoğan** announced his ambitious 2023 vision as the year being the centenary celebration of the Republic of Turkey. The 2023 Vision aimed for Turkey to have a vigorous foreign policy and involvement in all major global organizations and events. Also envisioned was Turkey becoming a key transportation-trade-pipeline hub as just like Central Asia, it too is a crossroads for East-West trade routes.

Under this ambitious vision to elevate Turkey's power and influence was the "Policy of Zero Problems with our Neighbors," created by former foreign minister and current Future Party leader **Ahmet Davutoğlu**. Ankara went from "Zero Problems with Neighbors" to "Problems with nearly all Neighbors" very quickly as the breakout of the Syrian War provided Turkey a rare opportunity to significantly expand its influence - if **President Bashar al-Assad** was deposed. The Syrian War was the first giveaway that the so-called "Zero Problems with Neighbors" policy, implemented in 2010, had not even lasted the course of 2011 before Erdoğan scrapped Davutoğlu's vision and quickly descended into an ideology of syncretic neo-Ottomanism and pan-Turkism.

The Republic of Turkey was founded by **Mustafa Kemal** following a campaign to create a "Turkey for the Turks" that culminated in the genocide of 3 million Armenians, Greeks and Assyrians. Surviving Christian populations that were not deported to Greece, the Soviet Union or allowed to remain in Istanbul, were forcibly Turkified and Islamified.

Because identity was fluid during the Ottoman Empire, all Muslims were labelled as Ottomans in censuses regardless if their ethnicity was Greek, Serb or something else. Kemal himself was born to [Dönme](#) (hidden Jewish but publicly Muslim) parents of [Albanian stock](#). Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Kemal embarked on a massive Turkification campaign to eliminate all identity that was not Turkish, and even adopted the moniker Atatürk (Father Turk). Atatürk enforced Turkification on a country that had only escaped total collapse from the Greek Army thanks to Bolshevik military aid. Turkey as a new country comprised of various Muslim peoples from the Balkans, Anatolia and the Caucasus that were rapidly Turkified to consolidate a united national identity and mythology for the newly established country.

Because of such a Turkification policy, most citizens in Turkey believe they are descended from Turkic tribes that conquered Anatolia, rather than indigenous peoples that were forcibly Turkified. Modern genetic testing has found that the majority of Turkish citizens have very little to zero Turkic admixture, with Turkey-born professors like [Mehmet Efe Caman](#) and [Ihsan Yilmaz](#) highlighting as much.

However, this forced Turkification has ideologically guided Ankara's foreign policy too. It is on this basis that Turkey today is actively introducing pan-Turkism with Political Islam to Azerbaijan and the Turkic countries of Central Asia. To challenge Russian influence over these countries, remembering that it was the Soviets who introduced secularism to the region, Turkey funds NGO's and institutions in these countries to consolidate pan-Turkic ideology that is also rooted in Islam.

This poses major issues, including for Russian security concerns, as Far-Right ultra-nationalist Turkish organizations like the once Gladio-funded Grey Wolves have the stated goal of uniting all Turkic-speaking peoples in one state stretching from the Balkans to Central Asia. The group has fought in Chechnya, made links with Tartar groups in Crimea, and encourage members to fight in Syria. One of their mottos is "Your doctor will be a Turk and your medicine will be Islam." [Erdoğan](#), his coalition partner [Devlet Bahçeli](#) and several [opposition leaders](#) are frequently seen making the hand signal of the group, which several countries recognize as a terrorist organization.

Erdoğan hopes that through the Turkic Council, comprising also of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, Turkish ideological influence can begin penetrating these countries. One of the mission goals of the Turkic Council is "developing common positions on foreign policy issues." Effectively, Ankara sees itself at the centre of a Turkic Arc that stretches from Kyrgyzstan to Istanbul, and hopes that it can encapsulate Central Asia into its own sphere of influence at the expense of Russia and China.

This will prove problematic as the synthesis of pan-Turkic identity and Political Islam will ultimately culminate into the expansion of the Grey Wolves or other ideologically aligned organizations into Central Asia. Just as the Grey Wolves are responsible for exporting terrorism to Syria and the Caucasus, and have committed massacres against Kurds, Alevis and other minority groups, such extremism will ultimately be exported to Central Asia too if these countries allow themselves to be consumed by Turkey's current ideological conjecture and foreign policy - just as it seeks to do through the Turkic Council.

For Russia, a growth of terrorism in Central Asia will be a direct affront to its own national security, especially as pan-Turkists have Crimea in their sights, and the more extreme

elements even look towards the Russian regions around the Altai Mountains, the mythological homeland of the Turkic people. For China, the threat is just as great, especially as pan-Turkist ideology also includes China's Xinjiang Province in their grand territorial aspirations.

In this way, a real ideological struggle is ensuing over Central Asia. The region has a choice to make – to take on Turkmenistan's example of being neutral (hence why it is not a Turkic Council member state), or go on the path into becoming pariah states that could become hotbeds of extremism and instability, which itself would drive away from serious investment opportunities and projects from China and Russia which cannot be replaced by a Turkey whose [economy is being battered](#).

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