

6 Islam and Turkey's soft power in Azerbaijan

The Gülen movement

Fuad Aliyev

Introduction

Turkey has always been an active player in the Caucasus. It has maintained a special relationship to Azerbaijan due to its ethnic and religious proximity, its important economic and geopolitical potential as a cultural “bridge” between Turkey and Central Asia and their concurrent geopolitical interests (Kartaş and Macit 2015). Since Azerbaijan gained its independence in 1991 it has always been a part of Turkish foreign policy interests, which in turn has provided for Turkey's growing political, economic and sociocultural influence. Indeed, relations between the two countries have been so close that Kartaş and Macit (2015) called them ‘emotionally-based’. Both sides, including state officials, have widely used the slogan “one nation—two states”, which exemplifies this sociocultural connection.

Religion, as one of the determinants of culture, has inevitably been utilized to various extents at different points in the complex bilateral relations between these two Muslim–Turkic nations. This chapter focuses on religion as a specific part of the Turkey–Azerbaijan relationship. It explores how the transnational religious actors from Turkey operate across state boundaries and how their relations with both the home and host states affect their success.

This chapter will give an overview of different actors in Azerbaijan, focusing specifically on the network led by Turkish preacher Fethullah Gülen (called the Gülen movement, *Hizmet* or *Cemaat*), which was the most successful actor until recently. Transnational religious actors should be capable of delivering an attractive message, and they should adapt to local conditions in order to be successful in any country (Haynes 2012). This chapter will assess the Turkish religious actors' activities in Azerbaijan based on their capacity to deliver attractive messages to target audiences and their ability to adapt to local conditions.

Turkish soft power in Azerbaijan has been based on ethnic and religious commonalities. In the field of religion, the strong connection between the Turkish government and the Gülen movement broke down in 2013–2014. The unsuccessful coup d'état attempt in July 2016 massively changed the situation in Turkey, resulting in precarious prospects for the future of the

Gülen movement. As this chapter will explore, this could not help but affect Turkish soft power abroad, including in Azerbaijan, since the government has lost one of its major informal tools.

In this chapter, “soft power” is understood as a state's ability to attain its policy agenda by influencing other states through attraction, not force. Thus, you get others to want what you want and achieve your policy objectives as a result (Nye 2004). Soft power is exercised through persuasion (the ability to convince using argumentation) and the capacity to attract (Nye 2004). Religion is considered an important element in the construction of identity and the cultural framing of domestic and foreign policies (Warner and Walker 2011). It has also historically been a form of soft power (Nye 2004, Haynes 2012). In this regard, the concept of soft power includes non-state religious actors who advance their own interests by attempting to induce policymakers to consider their religious beliefs, norms and values (Haynes 2012).

This chapter is based hugely on original qualitative data. Several in-depth interviews with state officials, independent researchers, alumni from the Gülen movement and journalists were conducted for this paper.¹ Many of the interviews took place before the closing of Gülen institutions in Azerbaijan in 2016. These interviews were updated after the events of 2016. In addition, conversations with a few individuals who were previously involved with the network in Azerbaijan and preferred to remain anonymous were held prior to and during this research.

This chapter is structured as follows: first, it reviews the role of soft power in Turkish foreign policy. Second, it explores the Turkish transnational religious actors' operations in Azerbaijan. Finally, it analyzes the phenomenon of the Gülen movement as a major non-state transnational actor in Azerbaijan before the split with the current AKP government, and examines its changing role in Turkish soft power afterwards.

Turkish foreign policy and soft power

This section is about path dependency and new trends in Turkey's foreign and soft power policy under the AKP (Justice and Development Party) government. After coming to power in 2001, the AKP government has in many ways continued the foreign policy patterns of previous governments while paying more attention to soft power, especially outreach to the Muslim world.

The ex-prime minister of Turkey, Ahmet Davutoğlu coined the slogan ‘zero problems with neighbours’ to describe modern Turkish foreign policy in (Davutoğlu 2010). This new foreign policy of regional expansion in the broader neighbourhood, with more embedded prospects for soft power, could be interpreted as a forced strategy by the AKP government to reduce the traditionally strong military influence on Turkish politics in both the domestic and international spheres (Jung 2012). This strategy has been supported by Turkey's new rising entrepreneurial class and civil society unhappy with the military's dominance.