
UZBEKISTAN: TURKISH LEADER'S VISIT SPARKS NEW HOPES

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The visit to Uzbekistan last week by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has been comprehensively covered by local media in a show of the importance it has been accorded.

Erdogan flew into Samarkand on November 17 and immediately laid flowers at the grave of President Islam Karimov, who was buried in the city in early September.

The visit to the grave was a purely pro forma exercise, however, and the main focus was on the meeting with acting President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who is to be formally confirmed in his post at the December 4 election.

Erdogan had a huge contingent of top officials in tow, demonstrating the value that Ankara has placed on the visit. The delegation included deputy prime ministers Veysi Kaynak and Tuğrul Türkeş, Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, Economy Minister Nihat Zeybekçi, Energy and Natural Resources Minister Berat Albayrak, Family and Social Policies Minister Fatma Betül Sayan Kaya, the Chief of the General Staff, Hulusi Akar, and the head of Turkish intelligence, Hakan Fidan

President * Erdogan stated that Uzbekistan and Turkey should upgrade their bilateral relations to a new level. He recalled that the head of the Foreign Ministry, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, [recently] visited Uzbekistan and during the visit the sides agreed on developing a roadmap on developing bilateral relations. He declared his hopes that Uzbekistan and Turkey would soon complete work on this document, news website Uzdaily.uz reported.

A televised report showed Mirziyoyev warmly welcoming Erdogan and saying: Welcome Mister Erdogan to the homeland of your ancestors □ Uzbekistan. He also recalled that Turkey was the first country to recognize Uzbekistans independence following the fall of the Soviet Union, something that Mirziyoyev said would never be forgotten.

Only a few firm developments appear to have emerged from the visit, however. Turkish businesses will cooperate on creating the Urgut free economic zone, some 90 kilometers from Samarkand. Textile and food processing enterprises are due to be created there with Turkish investment, according to media reports. Turkish investors are also interested in building hotels in some of Uzbekistan's prime tourist spots.

Mirziyoyev and Erdogan also agreed in Samarkand that they would hold an intergovernmental joint conference in Tashkent in early 2017 and that an Uzbek-Turkish investment forum would be organized on the sidelines of that event.

Turkey's foreign trade turnover with Uzbekistan in 2015 amounted to \$1.2 billion. There are 450 Turkish companies still operating in Uzbekistan, creating \$300 million worth of export goods annually, and providing work for 50,000 people.

The two leaders said that these figures were a poor reflection of the real potential and there was ample opportunity to increase trade by 2-3 times in the coming years.

In one important development to that end, Çavuşoğlu announced after the visit that Ankara had approved a visa-free regime for Uzbek citizens and that he expected Tashkent to reciprocate before too long.

In news of broader regional import, Erdogan told reporters on November 20 that Ankara is now looking to abandon ambitions to enter the European Union and will instead pursue membership in the six-nation Beijing- and Moscow-dominated Shanghai Cooperation Organization, of which Uzbekistan is also a member.

Erdogan's visit to Uzbekistan has been watched with great attention by representatives of the exiled opposition, many of whom have sought shelter in Turkey over the years.

One such politician, Pulat Akhunov, was skeptical about what would come out of Erdogan's trip.

Uzbek has very big demands over the issue of Muslims from Uzbekistan that are suspected of extremism and that are seeking refuge in Turkey. Uzbekistan wants them handed over en masse, but Turkey will not go for that. And there is also the issue of [opposition leader] Muhammad Solih,

who our authorities also want to get. So I think resetting relations will not work out, Akhunov told EurasiaNet.org.

But Nigora Khidoyatova, a political emigre based in the United States that has recently been linked with a possible return to her home country, said that the Uzbek government had lost interest in Solih, especially as he was a personal enemy only to Karimov.

A more decisive turning point in Uzbek-Turkish relations may have come after the failed Turkish coup in July, which Erdogan has pinned on the followers of US-based Turkish religious leader Fethullah Gülen. The activities of Gülen and his supporters have long been anathema to Tashkent, so this turn of events marks a curious convergence of interests.

What Erdogan likes most of all is that it has been a decade since Uzbekistan started kicking out all the Gülen schools and businesses, so I don't think it is likely there will be much horse-trading between the countries, Khidoyatova said.

Kaynak/Source: