

Central Asia and Azerbaijan: Does Islamic Solidarity Matter?

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This article looks at whether the foreign policies of post-Soviet Central Asian republics encompass the idea of Islamic solidarity. Specifically, it analyzes their relations with Muslim-majority Azerbaijan, which is concerned with gaining political and diplomatic support in the international arena in order to secure the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and accordingly, the restoration of its territorial integrity. The findings of the article evidence that the official agendas of the countries concerned towards Muslim nations and Azerbaijan particularly are rather opportunistic and do not follow any definite path. Instead, the article explains the actual origins of interstate solidarity which is scarcely determined by a religious factor.

Keywords: Islamic solidarity, Central Asia, Nagorno-Karabakh, foreign policy



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Introduction

One of the central priorities of Azerbaijan's foreign policy has been securing the resolution of the longstanding conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh based on the principle of territorial integrity. In this regard, Azerbaijan has focused on consolidating ties with the states and organizations which are potentially willing and able to support it in achieving this goal. In particular, since independence, official Baku has promoted a policy of good relations with Muslim countries, as well as used its Muslim identity as a way to strengthen these interactions. President

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However, Azerbaijan is concerned that some Muslim countries do not support it on the highest political level on certain critical issues, most notably, the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Essentially, despite the similar historical paths, common ethno-cultural and religious experiences as well as geographical proximity, this is the case with the Central Asian post-Soviet republics.

Notably, there were only 39 countries worldwide which voted in favor of the 2008 UN General Assembly Resolution 62/243 on "The Situation in the Occupied Territories of Azerbaijan" reaffirming the "continued respect and support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity" of Azerbaijan "within its internationally recognized borders", demanding the "immediate, complete and unconditional withdrawal of all Armenian forces from all the occupied territories of Azerbaijan"¹. Among them, 31 Muslim-majority states (out of 49 countries in which Muslims make up a majority of the population) expressed their solidarity with Azerbaijan's territorial claims to Nagorno-Karabakh² (including Azerbaijan itself).

1 United Nations (2008) *General Assembly adopts Resolution reaffirming territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, demanding withdrawal of all Armenian forces*. Available at: <https://www.un.org/press/en/2008/ga10693.doc.htm> (Accessed: 25 August 2017).

2 Original to this article: *Muslim-majority states' voting record of the 2008 UN General Assembly Resolution 62/243 on "The Situation in the Occupied Territories of Azerbaijan"*.

	Vote status	Countries	Number
Muslim-majority states' voting record of the 2008 UN General Assembly Resolution 62/243 on «The Situation in the Occupied Territories of Azerbaijan»	In favor	Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Brunei Darussalam, Comoros, Djibouti, Gambia, Indonesia, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Malaysia, Maldives, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, Uzbekistan , Yemen	31
	Against	-	0
	Abstain	Albania, Algeria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Egypt, Kazakhstan	5
	Absent	Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Iran, Kyrgyzstan , Lebanon, Mali, Mauritania, Syria, Tajikistan , Tunisia, Turkmenistan	13
Total – 49			

The breakdown of voting clearly demonstrates the lack of unanimity on the matter among the Muslim-majority post-Soviet republics. With Kazakhstan abstaining, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan “absent”, it was only Uzbekistan which expressed solidarity with Azerbaijan on such a crucial issue on this key international platform. The question is: why aren't Muslim-majority post-Soviet states supporting Azerbaijan on this critical matter of national interest? This article will examine the extent to which interstate solidarity determined by a religious dimension guides the above countries' foreign policy agendas, looking in particular at their foreign policies towards Azerbaijan.

Background: Islamic solidarity in the foreign policies of the Central Asian republics

It is generally believed that Muslim-majority countries refer to Islam in order to bolster their prestige in the Muslim world, and to strengthen bilateral and multilateral relations based on the idea of pan-Islamism as the feeling of solidarity between all

“true believers”³. The concept of Islamic solidarity is understood as an appeal to shared religious identity, compelling states to demonstrate in various forms their commitment to mutual support and consolidation⁴. In this regard, the establishment back in 1969 and subsequent development of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) – the second largest inter-governmental organization after the United Nations – is viewed as a manifestation of collective Muslim solidarity in the contemporary world⁵.

Relevance of Islamic solidarity – both in terms of political coordination and as wider awareness of a shared Muslim civilization – in the foreign policy agendas of Central Asian states since the collapse of the Soviet Union is ambiguous.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union brought Muslim-majority Azerbaijan to the Organization in 1991 along with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, joining the 51 member states. At the same time, the fear of Islamization remains on the agenda in Central Asia⁶. To this end, the relevance of Islamic solidarity – both in terms of political coordination and as wider awareness of a shared Muslim civilization – in the foreign policy agendas of Central Asian states since the collapse of the Soviet Union is ambiguous.

On the one hand, as far as the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is concerned, the five states supported a range of the OIC’s documents (including a set of resolutions) and statements advocating the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that the OIC has been unwavering in its stance, inter alia, by rejecting the so-called presidential and parliamentary elections in the occupied Nagorno-Karabakh; commemorating and strongly condemning the criminal act of the 1992 Khojaly massacre against a civilian Azerbaijani population as a crime against humanity; and calling for the “immediate, unconditional and complete withdrawal of Armenian forces from the Nagorno-Karabakh region and other occupied territories of Azerbaijan”.

Insofar as the commitment to Islamic consolidation in the individual policies of the five countries is concerned, for instance,

3 Stoddard, L. (2002). *The New World of Islam*. Ross & Perry, Inc., p. 112.

4 Menashri, D. (2013) *Central Asia Meets the Middle East*. Routledge, p. 227.

5 Ihsanoglu, E. (2010). *The Islamic World in the New Century: The Organisation of the Islamic Conference*. Hurst Publishers, p. 13.

6 Garibov, A. & Ibrahimov, R. (2013). *Iran and the Central Asia: A contentious partner for the region*. In *Geopolitical Competition in the Central Asia: The Dynamics of Relations with Azerbaijan*. SAM, p. 44.

Kazakhstan has provided financial and humanitarian aid to Syria suffering from the colossal humanitarian crisis and the civil war⁷. Funds from Kazakhstan were allocated through the OIC to the governments of Jordan and Lebanon to provide assistance to Syrians residing in refugee camps. Moreover, the recent Inaugural Session of the General Assembly of the newly-established Islamic Organization for Food Security of the OIC – headquartered in the Kazakh capital Astana – demonstrated Kazakhstan’s commitment to expanding international development aid efforts among the Muslim countries. Finally, Kazakhstan has providing ongoing support for politically unstable Muslim-majority Afghanistan, delivering foodstuffs and allocating millions of dollars for Afghan students to study at Kazakh universities⁸.

Turkmenistan, especially under President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, has also played a small but somewhat important role in Afghanistan’s development and reconstruction. Ashgabat has conveyed humanitarian aid to Kabul and forgiven a huge portion of Afghanistan’s debt for Turkmen electrical power. Moreover, Turkmenistan continues to supply Afghanistan with energy at a decent discount, as well as is contributing to the reconstruction of a portion of a railway connecting two countries. At the same time, as far as the Syrian crisis is concerned, the position of official Turkmenistan is complicated by the alleged involvement of Syrian Turkmen-minority insurgents in fighting against the Syrian government⁹. Uzbekistan’s foreign policy doctrine has undergone substantial changes under Shavkat Mirziyoyev as the country’s recently elected president. Tashkent is openly focused on the neighboring Central Asian republics, aiming to improve regional political and economic cooperation. It has emphasized the need for mutually beneficial ties with other Central Asian states, including Afghanistan, across a number of areas.

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Nevertheless, in terms of regional security, the prevention of

7 Sputnik International (2017) *Kazakhstan Delivers 500 Tonnes of Humanitarian Aid Cargo to Syria*. Available at: <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201701061049328032-kazakhstan-syria-humanitarian-aid/> (Accessed: 27 August 2017).

8 Trend News Agency (2015) *Kazakhstan, Afghanistan to intensify economic co-op*. Available at: <https://en.trend.az/casia/kazakhstan/2458905.html> (Accessed: 2 September 2017).

9 NewsDeeply (2016) *Displaced Turkmen Villagers Brace for a Cold Winter*. Available at: <https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2016/01/22/displaced-turkmen-villagers-brace-for-a-cold-winter> (Accessed: 2 September 2017).

religious extremism is being viewed as one of the priorities for increased cooperation in the region¹⁰. The violence that erupted between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbek populations in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 – leaving hundreds dead and injured as well as tens of thousands seeking shelter¹¹ – cast a long shadow over any pledges of regional interstate solidarity. The same applies to the border tensions between Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, where historical territorial claims occasionally escalate¹².

Notably, none of the five Central Asian countries supported Kosovo (with around 96 per cent of Muslim population) when it unilaterally seceded from Serbia in 2008. While it remains a sensitive and divisive political issue which split the international community, 115 countries have recognized Kosovo's independence as of 2017. Surprisingly, the number includes 36 of the 57 member states of

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the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. By contrast, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan opposed Kosovo's unilateral proclamation of independence on the basis of the principle of territorial integrity, while Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan opted for making no official statements on Kosovo's independence.

Equally, as the latest crisis unfolded in Myanmar, with tens of thousands of the country's beleaguered Rohingya Muslims fleeing appalling violence, some Central Asian countries confined themselves to condemning the crisis, while others remained largely silent¹³. This seems to reflect concerns among post-Soviet secular governments

about limiting the threats entailed by manifestations of Islamic radicalism. By contrast, the government of Azerbaijan committed to send humanitarian aid to Bangladesh, where the Rohingya Muslim refugees are fleeing persecution¹⁴.

10 Zakirov, I. & Nevskaya, Y. (2017) *Uzbekistan's New Foreign Policy Doctrine*. The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst. Available at: <https://cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13470-uzbekistans-new-foreign-policy-doctrine.html> (Accessed: 2 September 2017).

11 The Guardian (2011) *Kyrgyzstan: the scars of ethnic conflict run deep*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jun/10/kyrgyzstan-ethnic-conflict-osh-uzbekistan> (Accessed: 2 September 2017).

12 Crisis Group (2002) *Central Asia: Border Disputes and Conflict Potential*. Report №33 / Europe & Central Asia. Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/central-asia/tajikistan/central-asia-border-disputes-and-conflict-potential> (Accessed: 2 September 2017).

13 Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (2017) *In Central Asia, Sympathy And Solidarity For Rohingya*. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/rohingya-central-asia-social-media-sympathy/28722498.html> (Accessed: 7 September 2017).

14 Azerbaijan State News Agency (2017) *Azerbaijan sends humanitarian aid to Rohingya Muslims*. Available at: https://azertag.az/en/xeber/Azerbaijan_sends_humanitarian_aid_to_Rohingya_Muslims-1091927 (Accessed: 7 September 2017).

Finally, while all five of the Central Asian republics voted in favor of the 2012 UN General Assembly Resolution 66/225 on “Permanent sovereignty of the Palestinian people in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and of the Arab population in the occupied Syrian Golan over their natural resources”, which reaffirmed the right of the Palestinian people and of the population of the occupied Golan Heights over their natural resources, and recognized the right of the Palestinian people to claim restitution¹⁵, they all retain good relations with Israel, enjoying long-established diplomatic relations and fairly active interstate cooperation, including in the military sector.

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Incentives for Central Asia-Azerbaijan interactions

Central Asia is located in Azerbaijan’s immediate neighborhood, with the nations sharing a common religion, language, history and culture. The geographical proximity of Azerbaijan to the region as well as their shared roots and background mean that Azerbaijan and the Central Asian states are bound together by a range of mutual interests and concerns¹⁶. Despite this, the shared religious affiliation has hardly influenced relations between Azerbaijan and the five post-Soviet Central Asian nations. Moreover, Kazakhstan, for instance, with Muslims making up to 70% of the population¹⁷ and the region’s most successful economy, positions itself as a secular state (likewise Azerbaijan), which to a certain extent plays the “connecting” role in the relations between themselves.

At the same time, as far as Kazakhstan-Azerbaijan discourse is concerned, the leadership of Kazakhstan has provided

15 United Nations (2011) *Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 22 December 2011*. Available at: http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=%20A/RES/66/225 (Accessed: 7 September 2017).

16 Garibov, A. & Ibrahimov, R. (2013). *Iran and the Central Asia: A contentious partner for the region*. In *Geopolitical Competition in the Central Asia: The Dynamics of Relations with Azerbaijan*. SAM, p. 53.

17 The World Factbook (2017) *Kazakhstan*. Available at: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/kz.html> (Accessed: 15 September 2017).

Kazakh elites have primarily supported Azerbaijan's entirely valid position as far as the withdrawal of Armenian troops from Azerbaijan is concerned. Most recently, President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev refused to visit Armenia, which was planning to host a top-level meeting of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union

ongoing support for peace efforts in the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In doing so, the Kazakh elites have primarily supported Azerbaijan's entirely valid position as far as the withdrawal of Armenian troops from Azerbaijan is concerned. Most recently, President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev refused to visit Armenia, which was planning to host a top-level meeting of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU)¹⁸. This has been considered as an apparent expression of support for Azerbaijan, as well as Astana's unwillingness to endorse Armenia in light of the escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict that preceded the meeting. Notably, Armenia's conflict with Azerbaijan—which is not a member of the EEU but does have close relations with Kazakhstan – has been a thorn in the union's side since its foundation. Additionally, the common position of Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan with regard to the legal status of the Caspian Sea¹⁹ also reinforces their credible political relations..

Importantly, the prospects for economic cooperation between the two states are promising. The transport infrastructure, including maritime, is dynamically developing in both countries. Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan along with Georgia recently agreed to establish the “Trans-Caspian International Transport Route” Association, with its office in Astana²⁰. In a long run the route is expected to link China, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and then, via

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Turkey and Ukraine, with Europe. In this regard, both countries have got the opportunity to become not only transit nodes for goods being transported between China to Europe, but also production sites, and participate in a single production process within the Eurasian space.

Most importantly, the fact that Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan are considered to be the central regional energy players is to the mutual political understanding, due to the shared successes and challenges. Both are struggling to

18 Putz, C. (2016) *The Eurasian Economic Union's Armenia Problem*. The Diplomat. Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2016/04/the-urasian-economic-unions-armenia-problem/> (Accessed: 15 September 2017).

19 Johnson, R. (2007) *Oil, Islam, and Conflict: Central Asia Since 1945*. Reaktion Books, p. 205.

20 Trend News Agency (2017) *Trans-Caspian route prospective for Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan*. Available at: <https://en.trend.az/azerbaijan/business/2738252.html> (Accessed: 15 September 2017).

effectively utilize their significant oil and gas reserves in order to pursue independent domestic and foreign policies (unlike the majority of former Soviet republics that do not possess such a “lux” as a Turkish would say). The so-called “co-leaders” of foreign investment in the oil and gas sector, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan managed to attract billions of dollars in the early years of the post-independence era²¹. At the same time, being the biggest crude oil producers in the Caspian region heavily relying on oil exports to generate budget revenues, the countries are bound to be vulnerable to the decline of crude prices²².

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Unlike Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan’s relations with the other Central Asian states are not so enthusiastic. Once again, one may hardly “thank” or “blame” the shared religious affiliation for that. For instance, in the case of Turkmenistan, according to the CIA World Factbook, Muslims constitute around 89% of the population, while the largest minority refers to the followers of the Eastern Orthodox Church²³. Similar to Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan’s energy wealth is one of the main factors shaping its relations with Azerbaijan. In this regard, Turkmenistan has repeatedly expressed (at least on paper) interest in developing the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline project pipeline,²⁴ intended to transport natural gas from Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan to the European market, circumventing both Russia and Iran.

However, there is no observable progress on an agreement between Baku and Ashgabat regarding the final status and delineation of the Caspian Sea. More importantly, Turkmenistan has chosen to adopt a balanced/neutral position on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The recent official visit to Armenia by President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, his “warm reception” and the signing of several Turkmen-Armenian agreements, reflect the balanced approach

21 Oil & Gas Journal (1997) *How Oil, Gas Investment Prospects Compare For Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan*. Available at: <http://www.ogj.com/articles/print/volume-95/issue-30/in-this-issue/general-interest/how-oil-gas-investment-prospects-compare-for-azerbaijan-kazakhstan.html> (Accessed: 20 September 2017).

22 Badykov, N. (2015) *A new era for Caspian oil and gas*. Center for Strategic and International Studies. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/new-era-caspian-oil-and-gas> (Accessed: 20 September 2017).

23 The World Factbook (2017) *Turkmenistan*. Available at: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/tx.html> (Accessed: 20 September 2017).

24 Michel, C. (2015) *What Azerbaijan and Central Asia Have in Common*. The Diplomat. Available at: <http://thediplomat.com/2015/07/what-azerbaijan-and-central-asia-have-in-common/> (Accessed: 20 September 2017).

undertaken by Ashgabat towards both Azerbaijan and Armenia. None of this is indicative of the so-called Islamic solidarity in bilateral relations of Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan.

Uzbekistan, with the largest Muslim population in the region, is similar to Azerbaijan in regard to its constitutional self-determination as a secular state, albeit with a much higher level of religiosity among its population. Moreover, while both have witnessed a vast increase in Islamic activity since the early 1990s, there remains a certain ideological vacuum in Uzbekistan, whereas the Azerbaijani elites have managed to fill this vacuum with their own brand of tolerant national identity. This is largely explained by the fact that Azeri nationalism, which has its roots in the late nineteenth century, preceded the Soviet takeover²⁵. To this end, it is unlikely that bilateral relations of Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan are somehow influenced by the shared Islamic tradition. Instead, they are built upon mutual political support and the prospects of cross-regional transportation projects, including the long-standing initiative to implement the Transport Corridor Europe, Caucasus and Asia (TRACECA) program as a way to spur intermodal transport initiatives²⁶.

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As mentioned previously, Uzbekistan was the only Central Asian post-Soviet state to vote in favor of the UN General Assembly Resolution reaffirming the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and demanding withdrawal of all Armenian forces. Tashkent openly supported Azerbaijan's position in the long-standing conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan and recognized Armenia as the aggressor²⁷. In this regard, it is noteworthy that despite originally having joined the Russia-sponsored CSTO in 1994, Uzbekistan suspended its membership in 1994. According to the CSTO Charter, its members are obligated to assist each other militarily in case

25 Karagiannis, E. (2010) *Political Islam in the former Soviet Union: Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan compared*. Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict. Pathways toward terrorism and genocide, Volume 3, Issue 1, pp. 46-61. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17467586.2010.514937> (Accessed: 22 September 2017).

26 Valiyev, A. (2015) *Can Azerbaijan Revive the Silk Road?* PONARS Eurasia. Available at: <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/can-azerbaijan-revive-silk-road> (Accessed: 22 September 2017).

27 Valiyev, A. (2013) *Azerbaijan in Central Asia – future and perspectives*. The Uzbek Times, Issue 1, pp. 18-21. Available at: <https://ru.scribd.com/document/276714793/UZTIMES-Magazine> (Accessed: 22 September 2017).

of aggression by a third party. Despite the fact that Azerbaijan did not intend to trespass upon Armenian territory, Yerevan still sought to use the alliance as a tool to counterweight Azerbaijan's growing military strength. Uzbekistan's position on the issue was subsequently being reiterated within the framework of the GU(U)AM Organization for Democracy and Economic Development, of which it was a member for several years before suspending its membership in 2002. Currently, the potential for expanding bilateral relations is considered to be promising, with the recently elected Uzbekistan President Shavkat Mirziyoyev openly supporting "Azerbaijan's fair stance on the settlement of the Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh conflict"²⁸.

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Finally, as far as Azerbaijan's relations with the Muslim-majority Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are concerned, their dependence on Russia for remittances, general power configuration, as well as the absence of any movement towards rapprochement with the West are limiting factors. Therefore, they may be described as merely traditionally friendly, without truly strong mutual support on the political level or prospects for multilateral cooperation.

Conclusion

Despite the widely-held belief that Muslim countries around the world feel obliged to present a united Islamic front on a regional and global level based on shared historic and cultural ties, it seems that religion cannot overcome profound political differences or conflicts of interest on certain issues. Likewise, the significance of Islamic solidarity in the foreign policies of Muslim-majority Central Asian states – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – remains ambiguous, which positions them as somewhat opportunistic actors in the international political arena. The notion of the interstate Islamic solidarity is intermittently invoked in formulating the foreign policies of the five countries. Their respective positions towards the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the ongoing occupation of the internationally recognized territories of Muslim-majority Azerbaijan by neighboring Armenia are no exception. Russia's

²⁸ Azerbaijan State News Agency (2017) *President Mirziyoyev: Uzbekistan supports Azerbaijan's fair stance on Nagorno-Karabakh conflict*. Available at: https://azertag.az/en/xeber/President_Mirziyoyev_Uzbekistan_supports_Azerbaijan_039s_fair_stance_on_Nagorno_Karabakh_conflict-1104674 (Accessed: 22 September 2017).

geopolitical influence over Central Asia has limited their discretion in terms of foreign policy decision-making, including towards their brotherly Muslim nations.

This essentially answers the question of why Muslim-majority Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan supported Palestine, but not Kosovo. The answer seems to lie in Russia's position on the issues concerned. Back in 2011, Russia welcomed the efforts of Palestine to attain statehood and confirmed Russian support for the Palestinians in their state-building agenda. By contrast, Russia strongly opposed Kosovo's 2008 declaration of independence; Moscow supported the Belgrade's view that Kosovo is an indivisible part of Serbia. It appears that the official positions of the five Central Asian republics on the hottest political issues engaging Muslim-majority states ultimately reflect the official path undertaken by Russia, which still views these states as within its sphere of traditional geostrategic influence. In essence, despite the increasing China's role throughout Central Asia, Russia remains the most significant external power in the region, particularly via multilateral Russia-led formats such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Customs Union. In this regard, the Central Asian countries' geopolitical loyalty to Moscow is the decisive factor. The same logic applies to their policies towards the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

To this end, it seems that political decisions on the most sensitive political issues (even inside the Muslim world) are rarely governed by considerations of shared religious, cultural and historic roots, as opposed to cold political realities and basic common sense.