

Khoja Ahmad Yasavî in the Speeches of Turkish Presidents between 1998 and 2022

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Abstract

This article examines the representation of Khoja Ahmad Yasavî in the political speeches of Turkish presidents between 1998 and 2022. Drawing on discourse analysis of selected addresses by Süleyman Demirel, Ahmet Necdet Sezer, Abdullah Gül, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the study explores how Yasavî has been instrumentalized as a unifying figure in Turkey's foreign policy in the context of the newly independent Central Asian republics. Despite differences in political orientation, all four presidents consistently invoked Yasavî as a symbol of shared heritage, cultural continuity, and Turkic unity. The analysis reveals how Yasavî is rhetorically associated with other iconic Sufi figures such as Yunus Emre, Hacı Bektaş Velî, and Rûmî, as well as with places central to Turkic identity, including Turkistan, Anatolia, and Kazakhstan. While Sezer framed Yasavî in secular and cultural terms, Erdoğan emphasized religious and nationalist dimensions, whereas Demirel and Gül highlighted themes of Turkic fraternity and Turkish Kazakh partnership. The study concludes that Yasavî serves as a symbolic bridge across the Turkic world, illustrating how spiritual and cultural memory is mobilized for diplomatic and political purposes in contemporary Turkish foreign policy.

Keywords: Khoja Ahmad Yasavî, Turkish presidents, political discourse, Turkic world, cultural diplomacy, sufism

Introduction

Khoja Ahmad Yasavî is widely regarded as the first Turkic Sufi, credited with playing a decisive role in the Islamization of the Turkic tribes of Central Asia. He is believed to have died in 1166/7 in Yasi, today known as Turkestan, in southern Kazakhstan. His father, Shaykh Ibrahim, was a distinguished scholar in Sayram, a historic ancient city and a modern rural area in southern Kazakhstan [Okuyucu and Kaçar 2014: 90–92; Sultan 1593: f°34b]. Following his father's death, Yasavî was raised by Arslan Bab, under whom he received his initial spiritual instruction. According to legend, Arslan Bab—sometimes identified with Salmān al-Fārisī, one of the Companions (*ṣaḥāba*) of the Prophet— [Sertkaya 2014: 101–112] met Yasavî when the

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latter was seven years old, and entrusted him with the sacred mission (*amāna*) received from the Prophet: to preach Islam among the Turkic tribes. The symbol of this transmission was a date stone that Arslan Bab had received from the Prophet during a gathering and preserved in his mouth for 500 years [Algar 1991; Hasan 2009; Muminov 2001; Privratsky 2001: 55]. After the death of his first master, Yasavî pursued his studies at a madrasa in Bukhara, where he became a disciple of the spiritual authority Yusuf Hamadanî (969–1007). Upon Hamadanî's death, Yasavî was appointed as his third successor, leading the order for a brief period before returning to Turkestan to continue disseminating Islam in his native city. The Sufi brotherhood that bears his name, the *Yasaviyya*, later attracted followers across Central Asia, among the Volga Tatars, and in Anatolia [Eraslan 1983: 12–13; 1989:160; 2000: 102; Hasan 2012, 136–138; Kenjetay 2012: 785].

The *Dīvān-i Hikmat* (Book of Wisdom), attributed to Yasavî, is a collection of mystical poems composed in a plain Turkic vernacular [Zarcone 2012]. These didactic verses address themes such as love for God and the Prophet, adherence to religious and ethical norms, supplication, the struggle against the ego, stages of spiritual development, and reflections on death [Zarcone 2012]. Yet, the earliest surviving manuscript of the *Dīvān-i Hikmat* dates only to the 17th century, suggesting that the work is a later compilation rather than a direct product of the 12th century [Tulum 2017: 101–117; Zarcone 2000]. Moreover, extant copies of the text exhibit significant variation in linguistic features and content. Such divergences may be explained by the likelihood that the *hikmats* were not authored exclusively by Yasavî himself but rather by multiple writers among his disciples and successors [Zarcone 2000]. This textual fluidity, however, does not diminish Yasavî's stature. Across the centuries, he has been, and continues to be, revered as the first great Sufi master—or the chief among the *mashāyikh-i Türk* (“Turkic shaykhs”)—by Turkic communities.

This article examines the political rehabilitation of Ahmad Yasavî through the speeches of Turkish presidents in the period following the independence of the Turkic-speaking republics of Central Asia. Yasavî belongs to the pantheon of rediscovered heroes drawn “from historical or imagined pasts through legends, epics, and myths beginning in 1992–1993” [Balci 2003]. Such rediscoveries “constitute another dimension of Turkey's strategy in Central Asia” [Balci 2003].

My aim is to investigate the place and function of a 12th-century Sufi poet in Turkey's construction of bilateral relations with Central Asian states, as well as his instrumentalization by Turkish political leaders in the pursuit of diplomatic and strategic goals in the region. To this end, I first analyze the political context of Turkey in the early post-Soviet years, and thereafter, examine how Khoja Ahmad Yasavî has been represented in presidential discourse from 1998 to 2022.

1 The Political Context in Turkey during the Early Post-Soviet Period

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the project of constructing a “Turkish era” (*Türk çağı*) was started by President Turgut Özal (1927–1993) and continued under his successor, Süleyman Demirel (1924–2015). For Demirel, the dissolution of the USSR represented a historic opportunity for Turkey to assume leadership, or the role of “big brother,” in the region [Eren 2022; *Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi, Tarihe Düşülen Notlar-1, Yasama Yılı Açılışlarında Cumhurbaşkanlarının Konuşmaları-2, (1 Eylül 1990-1 Ekim 2011)* 2011: 13–14].

In a speech before the Turkish Grand National Assembly in September 1991, Özal declared:

A historic opportunity has presented itself to Turkey. If we do not make mistakes, if we remain stable, our country can benefit from this historic opportunity, perhaps by seizing a possibility that might otherwise have taken 400 or 500 years to materialize [...] If stability is maintained in the coming years, our country is prepared to rank among the foremost nations of the world by the year 2000. The twenty-first century will be the era of Turkey and the Turks. [*Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi, Tarihe Düşülen Notlar-1, Yasama Yılı Açılışlarında Cumhurbaşkanlarının Konuşmaları-2, (1 Eylül 1990-1 Ekim 2011)* 2011: 13–14]

First articulated by Özal, this celebrated notion of a “Turkish era” soon appeared in other political discourses of Turkish presidents. After Özal’s death in 1993, Süleyman Demirel, who succeeded him as president of the Republic, pursued the same orientation toward the newly independent Turkic states in the post-Soviet space. In the immediate aftermath of independence in Central Asia, Turkey’s policy was marked by a pronounced romanticism. For instance, at the First Congress of Friendship, Brotherhood, and Cooperation of Turkic States and Communities (*Birinci Türk Devlet ve Topulukları Dostluk, Kardeşlik ve İşbirliği Kurultayı*), held in Antalya on March 21, 1993, Demirel staged a ceremonial forging of iron to symbolize the Turks’ legendary emergence from *Ergenekon* [Limon 2022: 58]. However, this romantic symbolism, and the enthusiasm that accompanied it, hindered Turkey’s capacity to grasp the actual complexities of the region. Consequently, Ankara lost valuable time in coming to terms with the specific ideological dynamics of Central Asia.

Moreover, until 1991, those who took an interest in Central Asia generally viewed the region through the prism of their own nationalist ideological commitments [Limon 2022: 58–59]. Prior to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, only Turkish nationalist movements—often associated with conservative or reactionary currents on the political right—had displayed genuine concern for the Turkic populations of the USSR. Their rhetoric celebrated the

supposed greatness of the Turkish race and glorified the homeland of the Turks, Central Asia, and Siberia, which they referred to as “Turan” in their nationalist discourse [Balci and Tapia 2010: 138]. These groups, “nostalgic” for a lost homeland, desired the collapse of the Soviet Union, hoping it would open the path to independence and freedom for their kin. When the disintegration of the USSR began, they rejoiced, believing that the long-awaited realization of a unified Turkic world was finally at hand [Balci and Tapia 2010: 138]. However, the realities of Central Asia did not correspond either to the aspirations of Turkish nationalists advocating pan-Turkism or to the illusions of Turkish communists, who, for years, had admired the Soviet regime without perceiving the true conditions within the country. The Soviet Union’s closed political system, coupled with the scarcity of reliable information, enabled groups of diverse ideological persuasions to construct their own imagined versions of Central Asia [Limon 2022: 58–59].

To better understand the roots of Turkey’s political strategy toward the post-Soviet Turkic republics, one may recall a historical statement attributed to the founding president of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938). Though the authenticity of this quotation is uncertain, it has played a significant role in shaping Turkish discourse on Central Asia after 1991:

Today, the Soviet Union is our friend, our neighbor, and our ally. We need this friendship. But no one can foresee what will happen tomorrow. This Union, like the Ottoman Empire, like Austria-Hungary, may fragment. The nations it now holds could one day break away. The world may reach a new equilibrium. On that day, Turkey must know what it must do. We have brothers living under the rule of this ally. These brothers share our faith and our belief. We must be ready to support them (*sahip çıkmak*). Being ready does not mean remaining silent and waiting for that day. We must prepare. How do nations prepare for this? By keeping cultural bridges alive. Language is a bridge; history is a bridge. We must delve into our past and reunite through this shared heritage that events have torn apart. We cannot wait for the “Turks abroad” to come closer to us; we must go toward them ourselves. [Balci 2003]

This passage encapsulates the essence of Turkey’s post-1991 policy toward Central Asia. Even if its authenticity remains debatable, the quotation was cited by President Abdullah Gül in a 2010 speech before the Kazakh parliament. After recalling Atatürk’s words, Gül affirmed their continuing relevance:

These significant words of Atatürk constitute a testament for us. In line with this vision, it is our common duty and our responsibility toward our brotherly peoples—

the Turkic peoples—and toward future generations, to further strengthen the bridges built upon our shared history, culture, language, and faith. [Gül 2010b]

In fact, the intention to strengthen the bridges founded on shared history, culture, language, and faith did not first appear in Abdullah Gül's speech. For instance, Süleyman Demirel, when serving as prime minister during the presidency of Turgut Özal, had already spoken of a "Turkish world stretching from the Adriatic to the Great Wall of China." In this way, Turkey sought to penetrate the post-Soviet space, which, until then, had been inaccessible [Gültekin-Punsmann 2011: 297]. The sudden emergence of the Central Asian states offered Turkey an unprecedented opportunity, and President Turgut Özal urged his compatriots to seize it. In response, the Turkish government undertook a strategic reorientation of its foreign policy, placing renewed emphasis on the construction of cultural ties [Pahlavi 2002: 248]. Rapidly, Ankara redirected its diplomacy to prioritize the promotion of relations with "sister republics." Yet given the geostrategic significance of the new regional order, and the interest it aroused among the major powers, Turkey was compelled to exercise considerable caution in articulating this new policy [Pahlavi 2002: 252].

Turkish leaders came to view cultural policy, accompanied by a "spirit of cooperation," as the most effective means of extending Turkey's influence in the Turkic sphere in a sustainable manner. These considerations soon led to the conviction that cultural diplomacy represented a prudent choice [Pahlavi 2002: 252]. Prominent historical figures—primarily of a religious character—came to occupy a central place in Turkey's religious policy and cultural diplomacy. This is because in the aftermath of independence, as Islam increasingly emerged as a source of national identity in Central Asian republics, the rehabilitation of religious figures was viewed as a means of reconstructing national identity and reincarnating Islamic heritage. Among these figures, the most important and most revered across the Turkic world was Ahmad Yasavî [Ametbek 2018: 180; Zarcone 1997: 63]. From 1991 to the present, Ahmad Yasavî has been the figure most frequently invoked by Turkish political actors in the context of religious policy and cultural diplomacy in Central Asia. But why Ahmad Yasavî? To answer this question, we must return to 1919.

The "myth" of Khoja Ahmad Yasavî was constructed by the Turkish historian Mehmet Fuat Köprülü (1890–1966) in his pioneer work *Türk Edebiyatında İlk Mutasavvıflar* (Early Mystics of Turkish Literature) published in 1919 [Köprülü 1976; 2006; 2007]. In this book, Köprülü sought to establish a genealogical link between Khoja Ahmad Yasavî and Anatolian mystics such as Hacı Bektaş Veli (1209–1271) and Yunus Emre (d. 1320). Since its publication, the image of Ahmad Yasavî has remained fixed: the father of Turkic Islam, a poet who composed didactic verse in a pure Turkic idiom, and the figure credited with the Islamization of the Turkic peoples. By presenting Ahmad Yasavî as "the father of Turkish

Islam,” Köprülü succeeded in crafting a religious national hero for Turkey. For this reason, Ahmad Yasavî became a symbolic figure in Turkey’s international policy in Central Asia, particularly in Kazakhstan where he served as a reference point for constructing intimate and enduring bilateral relations. Indeed, in Turkish Kazakh relations, the figure of Ahmad Yasavî has played an intermediary role, with both sides invoking him as “the father of Turkic Islam,” and much of their symbolic rapport has developed around his legacy.

Accordingly, the following section examines the political speeches of Turkish presidents that refer to Ahmad Yasavî from 1998 onward. Our objective is to observe the lexical patterns surrounding the invocation of this great Sufi’s name: which words are most frequently employed before and after it, which proper names and adjectives recur, and which terms and toponyms are emphasized. Through such discourse analysis, we seek to understand how Ahmad Yasavî is represented in the presidential rhetoric of Turkey.

2 The Speeches of Süleyman Demirel between 1998 and 2000

Süleyman Demirel served as President of Turkey from May 16, 1993, to May 16, 2000. During his seven-year presidency, four speeches, comprising 485 words, delivered between 1998 and 2000 mention Ahmad Yasavî [Demirel 1999; 2000a; 2000b; 2000c]. Within them, following references to Ahmad Yasavî, Demirel also invokes seven other historical figures, each on two occasions: Rûmî (the mystical Sufi), Magtymguly (the Turkmen spiritual guide), Abai (the Kazakh poet), Nawâ’î (the Timurid poet), Dede Korkut (the epic storyteller central to Oghuz tradition), Gül Baba (the Bektashi Sufi poet), and Yunus Emre.

Among adjectives, Demirel most frequently employs “common” (*ortak*, five times), while “noble” (*ulu*) and “great” (*büyük*) appear twice each to describe Ahmad Yasavî. The word “Turk” (*Türk*, *Türkler*) occurs eight times in different formulations, including three instances of “the Turkic world” (*Türk dünyası*), once as “the Turkish language” (*Türk dili*), and once as “the Turkish Renaissance” (*Türk rönesansı*).

In addition to “Turk,” the most recurrent terms—with three instances each—are “root” (*kök*), “culture” (*kültür*), and “twenty-first century” (*21. Yüzyıl*).

A telling example can be found in Demirel’s remarks at the Sixth Summit of the Presidents of Turkic-Speaking States in April 2000:

The strength of the great Turkic world comes above all from the richness of our spiritual heritage, which our language has carried into the present. I attach great importance to the continuation of academic work so that the Turkish language—defined by the great architect of our spiritual world, Khoja Ahmad Yasavî, whose wisdom spread as far as Central Europe, as “a language that those who grasp its

meaning submit to in humility”—may be understood in its broadest sense throughout our geography. In this context, the matter of a common alphabet is one that specialists of the Turkic world should address. [Demirel 2000b]

Here, Demirel presents Ahmad Yasavî as “the great architect of the spiritual world” of the Turkic peoples and as the one who gave form to the Turkish language. Particularly striking is his association of Yasavî with the project of creating a common alphabet for the Turkic world, which underscores Yasavî’s role as a unifying symbol within Turkey’s international policy.

From the mausoleum of Ahmad Yasavî in the heart of Central Asia to the mausoleum of Gül Baba in Hungary, from the Babadağ Mosque in Dobruja to the Mostar Bridge in Bosnia, and from the Ertuğrul Gazi Mosque in Ashgabat, the monuments we have rediscovered or restored are symbols of our millennial values and our enduring commitment to tolerance. The Hoca Ahmet Yesevi University (in Turkestan) and the Manas University (in Bishkek), established in Central Asia through our joint efforts, will play an essential role in realizing a Turkish Renaissance in the twenty-first century, thereby contributing to universal civilization. These universities are the common heritage of the Turkic world. [Demirel 2000b]

This passage illustrates how the mausoleum of Ahmad Yasavî was used to symbolize the geographical reach of “Turkicness,” extending as far as the Balkans. The significance attached to Turkish universities—especially, the Turkish Kazakh Hoca Ahmet Yesevi University, which is relevant here—is explicitly highlighted in Demirel’s discourse. One may also note the persistence of the well-known slogan, first pronounced by Turgut Özal, that “the twenty-first century will be the era of the Turks.”

3 The Speeches of Ahmet Necdet Sezer between 2000 and 2007

Ahmet Necdet Sezer served as President of Turkey from May 16, 2000, to August 28, 2007. During his seven-year presidency, 13 speeches, containing a total of 876 words, mentioning Ahmad Yasavî can be identified [Sezer 2000a; 2000b; 2000c; 2000d; 2001; 2002a; 2002b; 2003; 2004; 2005a; 2005b; 2006a; 2006b; 2007]. In Sezer’s 13 addresses, following references to Ahmad Yasavî, the most frequently mentioned names are “Hacı Bektaş Veli” (10 times), “Rûmî” (10 times), and “Yunus Emre” (nine times).

Among toponyms, “Turkestan” (*Türkistan*) appears most often, with six occurrences. This is followed by “Anatolia” (*Anadolu*, five occurrences), “Turkey” (*Türkiye*, four occurrences), “Kazakhstan” (*Kazakistan*, three occurrences), and the “Mausoleum of Ahmad

Yasavî” (*Hoca Ahmed Yesevi Türbesi*, three occurrences).

To describe Ahmad Yasavî, Sezer uses adjectives such as “great” (*büyük*), “important” (*önemli*), and “beautiful” (*güzel*), each appearing three times. The word “Turk” (*Türk*) appears 15 times in various combinations: “the Turkic world” (*Türk dünyası*) seven times, “Turkish thinker” (*Türk düşünürü*) five times, and “Turkish nation” (*Türk ulusu*) three times. The words most frequently used after “Turk” are “teaching” (*öğreti*) and “thought” (*düşünce*), each appearing six times. Other frequently used terms include “culture” (*kültür*), “tolerance” (*hoşgörü*), and “contemporary” (*çağdaş*), each appearing four times.

Great thinkers and spiritual guides such as Ahmad Yasavî, Rûmî, Yunus Emre, and Hacı Bektaş Velî initiated the Anatolian Enlightenment through their insights and teachings that remain relevant to this day, and contributing to the formation of the democratic and modern identity of the Republic of Turkey. [Sezer 2006a]

This quote shows how Sezer’s perception of Ahmad Yasavî contains numerous meanings and connotations shaped by the worldview and ideology of those who mention his name. Here, Yasavî is presented as a figure whose teachings are compared to the European Enlightenment and as one who ultimately contributed, centuries after his death, to the creation of the secular, democratic, and modern Turkish Republic. This example demonstrates that the perception of Yasavî varies according to the political orientation of each president.

4 The Speeches of Abdullah Gül between 2007 and 2014

During the presidency of Abdullah Gül, who held office from August 28, 2007, to August 28, 2014, 12 speeches, comprising 715 words, mention Ahmad Yasavî [Gül 2009; 2010a; 2010b; 2010c; 2010d; 2010e; 2011; 2012; 2013a; 2013b; 2013c]. Among the figures cited, the most frequently mentioned after Yasavî is “Yunus Emre” (five times), followed by “Rûmî” (three times) and “Hacı Bektaş Velî” (once).

As for place names, Gül refers five times to the “Turkish Kazakh Hoca Ahmet Yesevi University” (*Hoca Ahmet Yesevi Üniversitesi*), four times to “Kazakhstan” (*Kazakistan*), twice to “Turkestan” (*Türkistan*), and twice to “Turkey” (*Türkiye*).

Among adjectives, the most common is “great” (*büyük*, three occurrences), followed by “powerful” (*güçlü*, two occurrences). Once again, the word “Turk” (*Türk*) appears most frequently, with 12 instances across various formulations: “Turkic world” (*Türk dünyası*, three times), “Turkic Academy” (*Türk Akademisi*, three times), “Turkic culture” (*Türk kültürü*, twice), “Turkish civilization” (*Türk medeniyeti*, twice), “Turkish poet” (*Türk şairi*, once), and “Turkish history” (*Türk tarihi*, once). The word “future” (*gelecek*) appears five times, while

“Turkish language” (*Türkçe*) and “thinker” (*düşünür*) each occur four times.

This vision is embodied in the motto of the great Turkish thinker Ismail Gasprinski: “Unity in language, thought, and action.” Khoja Ahmad Yasavî of Turkestan exerted great influence on Yunus Emre, the pioneer of Anatolian Sufism. Yunus Emre, in turn, deeply shaped the work of Magtymguly, the spiritual guide of the Turkmen people. Finally, the elevation of Magtymguly as a shared value of the Turkmen and of the entire Turkic world today is one of the clearest examples of this spiritual affinity. [Gül 2013b]

It is noteworthy that Gül mentions Ismail Gasprinski (1851–1914) in the same speech in which he evokes Ahmad Yasavî. He emphasizes Yasavî’s influence on Yunus Emre, who is viewed as the pioneer of Anatolian Sufism, and notes, in turn, Yunus Emre’s impact on Magtymguly, the Turkmen mystic. Gül connects these leading figures of Turkic religious and cultural tradition, emphasizing their shared heritage. This passage is significant in that it demonstrates the role played by Yasavî in the rhetoric of the Turkish presidency. In this rhetoric, spiritual leaders and Sufi poets are presented as figures who played a central role in the construction of “national Islam.” Through the transmission of spiritual ideas, principles, and values, these figures are depicted as having formed a religious and cultural identity that unites Turkish peoples across borders, reinforcing an idea of Islam specific to Turkey and its heritage.

Our friendship and brotherhood with Kazakhstan have deep roots, and the future is equally promising. The past and our roots are strong, for Turkestan is the ancestral homeland of all of us. Our great forefathers, Hoca Ahmet Yesevi and the great scholars who shaped our beliefs and spiritual values, all came from here. If we look further back, this land was our homeland, and from here the Turks marched westward. We therefore have no doubts about our past, nor do we doubt our future. [Gül 2010c]

This passage reflects Gül’s efforts to promote the historical and cultural ties between the Turkish and Kazakh peoples, and his promise of a shared future. Gül emphasizes Turkistan as the homeland of the ancestors and notes that figures such as Ahmed Yasavî contributed to shaping the spiritual and cultural identity of both Turks and Kazakhs. This highlights a shared cultural heritage dating back centuries. Gül positions the continuity of the Turkish and Kazakh peoples within a shared historical trajectory by recalling the westward migration of the Turks from Turkistan. In sum, his discourse highlights “the rich shared history”—a common cultural legacy—and a mutual confidence in the future. He emphasizes the strength of historical and

cultural roots while affirming the determination to cultivate these ties for generations to come.

5 The Speeches of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan between 2014 and 2022

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has served as President of the Republic since 2014. Between 2014 and 2022, 12 political speeches, with a total of 1,537 words, can be identified in which he refers to Ahmad Yasavî [Erdoğan 2014; 2015a; 2015b; 2016a; 2016b; 2018; 2019; 2021a; 2021b; 2022a; 2022b; 2022c]. In these speeches, “Hacı Bektaş Velî” is mentioned seven times, “Yunus Emre” eight times, and “Rûmî” six times. Among toponyms, “Anatolia” (*Anadolu*) appears most frequently, with 13 occurrences, followed by “Turkestan” (*Türkistan*, eight times) and the “Balkans” (*Balkanlar*, five times).

The most common adjectives in Erdoğan’s speeches are “spiritual” (*manevî*, six occurrences) and “common” (*ortak*, four occurrences). The single most frequently used noun is “heart” (*gönül*, 10 occurrences). Other recurrent terms include “Turkish language” (*Türkçe*, seven times), “knowledge” (*irfan*, seven times), “flag” (*bayrak*, six times), “geography” (*coğrafya*, six times), “Turk” (*Türk*, six times), “future” (*gelecek*, five times), “nation” (*millet*, five times), “language” (*dil*, four times), and “mission” (*vazife*, four times).

In addition to all these elements, the principal institution that marked these lands [Anatolia] with the Turco-Islamic seal was the dervish lodges. The dervishes who migrated from Turkestan to Anatolia with the permission of Hoca Ahmet Yesevi established lodges across this new homeland. [Erdoğan 2021a]

Just as Kazakhstan is our ancestral homeland, Turkey is the second homeland of our Kazakh brothers and sisters. It is said that Yahya Kemal Beyatlı once remarked to Fuat Köprülü: “Look to Ahmet Yesevi, there you will find our roots.” Those who made Anatolia our homeland were the warriors of the heart who were nurtured in the hearth of wisdom of Hoca Ahmet Yesevi. The light of the spark ignited by Pîr-i Türkistan, Hazrat Yasavî, continues to illuminate our path today, as it has for centuries. [Erdoğan 2022b]

The idea of the “Turco-Islamic seal” constitutes the central theme of this discourse. Erdoğan adds a national dimension to Islam, suggesting that this distinctively Turkish Islam left its mark on Anatolia through the dervishes who came under Ahmad Yasavî’s spiritual authority. In his speech, Erdoğan emphasizes that the dervish lodges established in Anatolia by Yasavî’s disciples played a decisive role in spreading Islamic and Turkish culture throughout the region. These dervishes contributed to the shaping of Anatolia’s cultural and religious identity as spiritual figures, thereby creating a form of Islam intimately tied to Turkish

traditions and values.

Erdoğan also defines Turkey as “the second homeland of the Kazakhs,” presenting Ahmed Yasavî as a symbolic “bridge” between Kazakhstan and Turkey and emphasizing the importance of this figure in establishing a deep cultural and spiritual bond between the two countries.

6 Overall Distribution of Terms Used

In a collective analysis of presidential discourses, the terms most consistently associated with the name of Khoja Ahmad Yasavî are *büyük* (great), *Türk* (Turk), and *ortak* (common). This cluster of words is quite revealing: Yasavî is constantly framed as a symbol of greatness, an emblem of Turkic identity, and a shared heritage of the Turkic world.

Equally important is the tendency to mention Yasavî alongside other canonical figures of the Turkic–Islamic tradition, particularly Yunus Emre and Hacı Bektaş Velî. This rhetorical pairing reinforces the notion of a continuous civilizational space by placing Yasavî within a broader spiritual lineage connecting Central Asia to Anatolia.

Collectively, these associations show that in the president’s discourse, Yasavî functions not only as a historical or religious figure, but also as a unifying symbol expressing themes of shared heritage, cultural greatness, and Turkic solidarity. His name has become a focal point around which political leaders construct shared identity narratives, linking past traditions with current diplomatic goals.

Conclusion

The analysis reveals that Turkish presidents have attempted to establish ties between Central Asian Turkic states and Turkey by using the name of Ahmed Yasavî. Despite different political orientations, they are united in terms of foreign policy. Their tendency to emphasize their shared religious and cultural heritage forms the main motif of their discourse. Ahmad Yasavî becomes a powerful symbol in the construction of cultural and political ties with the Turkic-speaking countries. Represented by Turkey as a shared figure for all Turkic peoples, Yasavî serves the function of unifying them centuries after his death. What conclusions may be drawn from this result? As we have seen in the preceding sections, Turkish presidents often cite Anatolian Sufis such as Yunus Emre, Hacı Bektaş, and Rûmî when evoking Khoja Ahmad Yasavî. In terms of place names, they highlight Turkestan, Anatolia, Kazakhstan, and Turkey—except in Erdoğan’s case, where alongside Anatolia and Turkestan, he also refers to the Balkans, which in our view reflects a neo-Ottoman ambition.

Our analysis has also shown that Ahmet Necdet Sezer—the most secular of the four

presidents—employs relatively neutral terms when speaking of a religious figure such as Yasavî; for example, “doctrine, thought, culture, tolerance, and contemporary.” For Sezer, Yasavî is a thinker (*düşünür*), a man of thought (*düşünce*), who holds a certain significance within Turkish culture (*kültür*) in enabling the Republic of Turkey to construct a modern national identity. By contrast, Erdoğan’s speeches portray Ahmad Yasavî through a more religious and nationalist vocabulary—heart (*gönül*), knowledge (*irfan*), flag (*bayrak*), nation (*millet*).

Following the independence of five Central Asian countries: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Süleyman Demirel, who assumed the presidency, emphasized Turkic identity, brotherhood among countries speaking Turkic languages, shared heritage and values, and the search for cultural and national roots. All of these were of vital importance for Central Asian countries during the identity-building process at that time. Abdullah Gül, however, placed greater emphasis on relations between Kazakhstan and Turkey and highlighted the common future of these two nations within the framework of Turkish identity.

In conclusion, the analysis demonstrates that since the independence of the Central Asian republics, Khoja Ahmad Yasavî has emerged as a unifying figure for the Turkic-speaking world in the rhetoric of Turkish presidents. More specifically, we observe the instrumentalization of a religious-historical personality as a unifying figure for explicitly political ends in a period characterized by the pursuit of diplomatic reconciliation. This usage has been repeated by all Turkish presidents—despite their ideological and political differences—as a strategic imperative of Turkey’s foreign policy, inherited from the vision of the Republic’s founder, Atatürk. Ultimately, the case of Ahmad Yasavî illustrates how spiritual and cultural memory can be mobilized in the service of statecraft, revealing the deep entanglement of religion, identity, and diplomacy in Turkey’s approach to Central Asia.

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