

A COMMON ALPHABET IN THE TURKIC WORLD: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND, CURRENT SITUATION AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

 Mehmet Can

Topkapı University, Istanbul, Türkiye
e-mail: mailmehmetcan@gmail.com

Abstract. The idea of creating a common alphabet for the Turkic republics has been a recurring theme since the early 20th century. The underlying purpose of this idea must be carefully analysed in terms of its future benefits. According to initial assessments, the aim is to facilitate communication among Turkic peoples and create a common identity. During the Soviet era, Turkic peoples who used the same alphabet were forced to change their alphabet and after the 1926 Baku Turkic Congress, the Arabic-based alphabet was abolished. It was replaced by the Latin alphabet. By the 1940s, Russian linguists had voiced their dissatisfaction with this alphabet. Ultimately, different Cyrillic alphabets were introduced. The aim here was to limit verbal and written communication among Turks. After the collapse of the USSR, the newly independent Turkic republics sought a new alphabet and all except Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan switched to the Latin alphabet. However, the different variants added to the alphabet they use today have brought with them certain problems.

Keywords: A common alphabet, Turkic World, Turkic republics.

TÜRK DÜNYASINDA ORTAQ ƏLİFBA: TARİXİ KEÇMİŞ, MÖVCUD VƏZİYYƏT VƏ GƏLƏCƏK PERSPEKTİVLƏR

Mehmet Can

Topkapı Universiteti, İstanbul, Türkiyə

Xülasə. Türk respublikaları üçün ortaq əlifba yaratmaq ideyası 20-ci əsrin əvvəllərindən bəri təkrarlanan bir mövzu olmuşdur. Bu ideyanın əsas məqsədi gələcək faydaları baxımından diqqətlə təhlil edilməlidir. İlk qiymətləndirmələrə görə, məqsəd türk xalqları arasında ünsiyyəti asanlaşdırmaq və ortaq kimlik yaratmaqdır. Sovet dövründə eyni əlifbadan istifadə edən türk xalqları əlifbalarını dəyişdirməyə məcbur edilmiş və 1926-cı il Bakı Türk Qurultayından sonra ərəb əsaslı əlifba ləğv edilmişdir. Onun yerinə latın əlifbası qoyulmuşdur. 1940-cı illərə qədər rus dilçiləri bu əlifbadan narazılıqlarını bildirmişdilər. Nəticədə fərqli kiril əlifbaları tətbiq olundu. Burada məqsəd türklər arasında şifahi və yazılı ünsiyyəti məhdudlaşdırmaq idi. SSRİ-nin dağılmasından sonra yeni müstəqillik qazanan türk respublikaları yeni əlifba axtardılar və Qırğızıstan və Qazaxıstan istisna olmaqla, hamısı latın əlifbasına keçdi. Lakin bu gün istifadə etdikləri əlifbaya əlavə edilən müxtəlif variantlar müəyyən problemlər də gətirmişdir.

Açar sözlər: Ortaq əlifba, Türk Dünyası, Türk Respublikaları.

1. Introduction

Throughout history, Turkic peoples have lived in various regions of the world. Consequently, they have been influenced by the communities they interacted with, enriching their linguistic and alphabetical traditions. The process spanning from the Orkhon inscriptions to the Uyghur and Arabic alphabets not only reflects the cultural richness of the Turks but also made the necessity of a common alphabet inevitable.

Particularly in the 20th century, the Turkic peoples, whose lands were occupied by Soviet Russia, were separated from each other and artificial borders were placed between them.

In order to divide them culturally, they were switched to the Latin alphabet in 1926 and then to different Cyrillic alphabets in the 1940s.

Our aim is to make the subject more comprehensible, to reveal the underlying motives behind the social and cultural divisions experienced by the Turkic peoples during the period of Soviet rule (1925-1991) and the prohibition of the Arabic alphabet they had used for centuries, followed by their transition first to the Latin and then to the Cyrillic alphabets.

Furthermore, we examined the advisory decisions made in 1991 by linguists from the Turkic republics, organised by Istanbul Marmara University, regarding the abandonment of the Cyrillic alphabet used for approximately 65 years by the Turkic republics that declared their independence following the collapse of the USSR. We examined the Latin alphabet currently used by Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. We evaluated the shortcomings of the different letters in their alphabets and their impact on the common language of communication among Turks, focusing on Turkey. The article covers the period from 1926 to 1940 and after 1991.

Finally, we approached the ‘Common Turkish Alphabet’, which has been brought back to the agenda by the members of the Organisation of Turkic States, from socio-political and linguistic perspectives. We focused on a model that could be implemented in the future. We believe that this article will guide researchers who will work on the same subject in the future.

2. Historical background

2.1. Ancient Turkish alphabets

Turkish peoples living in many parts of the world have adopted multiple alphabets, influenced by the nations with whom they have communicated throughout history. Research indicates that the first writing system of the Turks was the Orhun alphabet. When we look at the main features of this alphabet, it is noteworthy that it is phonetic and sound-based, in line with the phonetic structure of the Turkish language. However, in later periods, they adopted the Uyghur, Mani and Brahmi alphabets, among others. It can be said that these alphabets have played a significant role in the cultural history of the Turks. ‘With the advent of Islam, these alphabets lost their value and were replaced by the Arabic-based Turkish script’ [4].

2.2. The adoption of Islam and the Arabic alphabet

In the 8th century, the Arabs' turn towards the Turkistan region led to communication among the Turks, which facilitated their introduction to the Islamic religion. Subsequently, they adopted the Arabic alphabet and the Karakhanid, Seljuk, Ottoman and other Turkic states used this alphabet for approximately ten centuries. Looking at the reasons why they used this alphabet for so long, it can be said that, in addition to the Qur'an being written in these letters, Islamic scholarship was conducted using these letters and madrasa education at that time was also conducted using this alphabet. In a political context, the process that began with the

Karakhanid state was influenced by the idea of integrating the Turks into the Islamic world. This alphabet was also used by writers who produced works in Arabic, Persian and Turkish in many parts of the world. According to American researcher Michel Hickok, Middle Eastern historians at American universities are proficient in Ottoman writing and language. Furthermore, British researcher Caroline Finkel states that, although not to the same extent as in America, studies using the Arabic alphabet are also conducted at British universities [7].

2.3. Latinisation movements at the beginning of the 20th century

Within the framework of Westernisation, the movement initiated particularly in Azerbaijan has led to the intensification of reform movements in Turkey and the Crimean peninsula. Following the Turkic Studies Congress held in Baku in 1926 with Russian support, the idea of replacing the Arabic alphabet with the Latin alphabet gained momentum as a result of political pressure from the Soviet administration. Alimcan Şeref, a member of the First Baku Turkic Studies Congress, described the situation as follows:

“The books that fill all the treasures, which are the thousand-year-old cultural means of Muslims and Turks, have been written and recorded with these letters. The Russians, pursuing a policy of cultural imperialism to alienate the Turks they wanted to colonise from their own identity, changed their original alphabet, first replacing it with the Latin alphabet and then with the Russian alphabet” [6].

This is important in that it shows us the geographical extent of the Islamic script. It should also be noted that the Arabic alphabet developed and enriched itself further in the hands of the Turks.

‘Despite the drawbacks of the Arabic letters being difficult to learn and write phonetically in different Turkish languages, dialects and accents, they were used from the 10th century to the first quarter of the 20th century’ [2].

2.4. Alphabet differentiation in the Soviet period

As Soviet administrators strengthened their position within the state, they strove not only to govern the Turkic peoples but also to assimilate them culturally. This concern manifested itself in the 1930s when, in order to separate the Turkic peoples whose lands it had occupied, it abandoned the Latin alphabet and introduced different Cyrillic alphabets for each Turkic community under its control. This was because they viewed the Turkic peoples as a threat to their authoritarian regime. If their alphabets were differentiated, the ability to read and write each other's scripts would be eliminated, dealing a blow to their shared culture. If the sense of shared culture among the Turks persisted, their loyalty to the Soviet centre would become difficult to maintain. This was implemented rapidly, coercively and by eliminating Turkic scholars.

The idea of changing the Arabic alphabet to the Latin alphabet began in Azerbaijan after the Sakha Turks in Siberia. ‘The main reason for this was that some of the Turkish intellectuals who believed in the necessity of using the Latin alphabet were Azerbaijan Turks.’ (Şanlı, 1922)

The writing revolution initiated under Azerbaijan's leadership spread throughout the Turkic world. With this, the Turks could easily understand each other and the unity of Turkic culture would continue. In fact, there was a situation that the Russians overlooked: the Latin alphabet created a unity of dialect or speech among the Turks. However, the Soviet administrators wanted to prevent the Turks from becoming closer to each other. The main purpose of the alphabet changes was to prevent this. It was to narrow their cultural sphere. During a period when the world was focused on the Second World War, they took advantage of this opportunity and had the Cyrillic alphabet accepted without encountering any difficulties.

It is known that Christian nations living under Russian rule (Georgians, Germans, Armenians) also complained about their alphabets from time to time. However, Moscow never turned these demands into a movement’ [3].

3. The search for a new alphabet following the collapse of the USSR

After the collapse of the USSR, the Turks living in Central Asia and the Caucasus declared their independence. The search for an alphabet was at the forefront of the most important cultural endeavours during this new period. Abandoning the Cyrillic alphabet imposed during the Soviet era, they began efforts to create an alphabet unique to themselves. This is because the Cyrillic alphabet was seen as an obstacle to cultural integration among the Turkic peoples, as well as being incompatible with their independence. For this reason, the search for a new alphabet was not merely a technical issue, but rather carried with it the idea of nation building, identity formation and most importantly, reintegration with the Turkic world.

Looking at the work that has been done, it can be seen that the most important and decisive event in terms of the alphabet was the International Symposium on Contemporary Turkish Alphabets, held under the leadership of the Republic of Turkey on 18-20 November 1991. Linguists from the Turkic republics participated in this meeting and after discussions, they decided to adopt the following Latin-based alphabet:

a	b	c	ç	d	e	ä
f	g	ğ	h	ı	i	
j	k	qı	m	n	ñ	
o	ö	p	r	s	ş	t
u	ü	v	w	y	z	

In essence, this decision did not reflect political authority but was intended solely to guide administrators. Indeed, Azerbaijan has added the letters ‘ə’, Uzbekistan ‘sh, ch, ng’ and

Turkmenistan ‘ž, ý’. Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan continued to use the Cyrillic alphabet for a long time, but Kazakhstan switched to the Latin alphabet with a decision taken in 2017. Kyrgyzstan continues to use the Cyrillic alphabet.

The Organisation of Turkic States (OTS) has recently gained political momentum. They have also made significant academic progress regarding the common alphabet, which has been on their agenda for a long time. The idea that stands out in the studies is the following Latin-based alphabet consisting of 34 letters:

a ä b c ç d e
f g ğ h ı i j
kq l mn ŋ o
öp r s ş t u
ü vy zw

Looking at this decision, although it differs by a few letters from the Turkish perspective, it can be said that it is an important step towards creating a common culture among the Turkic Republics. It can be seen as an opportunity in terms of re-establishing cultural relations.

4. Fundamental problems in the search for a common alphabet

Although these decisions have led to alphabetical unity in the Turkic world, they have also brought with them some fundamental problems. In particular, the different variants added to the alphabets of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have complicated the search for a common alphabet. The fact that Uzbekistan continues to use the Cyrillic alphabet alongside the Latin alphabet can be said to stem from its interests with Russia.

If we take the examples of Turkey and Uzbekistan, where different letters have been added to their alphabets, the spelling of ‘Xush Kelibsiz’ in the Latin alphabet used in Uzbekistan, written with letters from Turkish as ‘Hoş geldiniz’ or ‘Vatanni sevish’, ‘Vatani Sevmek’, as seen in the examples, makes communication between Turks difficult.

On the other hand, although switching to a common new alphabet is an important issue, it will also bring many disadvantages, such as signage, official documents and educational books. Considering the political atmosphere in the Turkic world and the momentum gained, it is an important opportunity to create a common Turkic culture once again, as in history. ‘Every language reflects the culture of the society in which it is spoken’ [1].

5. Possible consequences of switching to a common alphabet

A common alphabet will not only facilitate written communication among Turkic peoples, but also pave the way for cultural ties to be strengthened once again, as they were in history. Although there are significant cultural similarities between the Turkic republics and Turkey today, different alphabets stand in the way of this being realised. If a common alphabet

is established, it is clear that, in addition to shared literature, history and art, the flow of information will also accelerate. Not limited to these, it will also provide advantages in the economy. Viewed in this light, it can be seen that the alphabet serves not only as a cultural tool but also as a means of ensuring economic development.

When we evaluate this in terms of the Cyrillic alphabet, the influence of the Russian alphabet will weaken and the institutional ties between the member countries of the Organisation of Turkic States will strengthen. For this reason, although a common alphabet is considered a cultural policy, it highlights the importance of a strong idea and effort. From this perspective, it requires multifaceted planning.

At the third meeting of the Turkic World Joint Elifba Commission held in Baku on 9-11 October 2024, Prof. Dr. Osman Mert, President of the Turkish Language Institution, stated the following:

“My brothers and sisters! What brings us together around this table is our common language, our common culture, our common past and our common identity. An alphabet is, in its simplest sense, a system of symbols, but the indispensable first condition for cultural unity is unity in writing. If we cannot achieve this, it is impossible for us to achieve unity in any other area. I believe that we must not forget this sentence as we talk around this table and make decisions. Our ancestors achieved this in the past... If Manas is ours; if Oğuz Khan, Bilge Khan, Bilge Tonyukuk and Dede Korkut are our ancestors and if we are their descendants, then we are obliged to do in this century what our ancestors did in the past. We owe it to our ancestors, our people and our descendants. We must act with this responsibility in mind. Let us not forget this! We will succeed!”.

Conclusion. The idea of creating a common alphabet in the Turkic world has historical roots and has become more feasible than ever before given the current circumstances. The fact that most of the independent Turkic republics have adopted the Latin alphabet is significant in terms of cultural and political integration, as it will pave the way for the peoples to embrace each other. A common alphabet is not merely a unifying writing system; it is also an important opportunity to create and strengthen a shared identity. Achieving a result in these efforts, coordinated by the Organisation of Turkic States, is possible through the establishment of a commission of experts in the field of language and a technical committee to make it feasible.

References

1. Bacon E. (1994), *Esir Orta Asya*. Çeviren Tansu Say. İstanbul: Tercüman Yayınları, 201.
2. Can M. (2021), *SSCB Hakimiyeti Altındaki Türk Topluluklarında Yapılan Alfabe Değişikliklerinin Türk Kültürüne Etkisi*. Ankara: Akçağ Yayınları, 43, 92.
3. Can M. (2022), *Türk Birliğine Engel Alfabe ve Dil Meselemiz*. İstanbul: BKY Yayınları, 34.
4. Ergin M. (2001), *Orhun Abideleri*. İstanbul: Boğaziçi Yayınları, 17.

5. <https://tdk.gov.tr/icerik/basindan/turk-dunyasi-ortak-turk-alfabesinde-uzlasti/> Accessed on 16.01.2026.
6. Şerfi A. (1993), Harflerimizin Müdafaası. İstanbul: Bedir Yayınevi, 5.
7. Şerifoğlu O. (1997), İslam Harflerinin Müdafaası. İstanbul: Sebil Yayınevi, 64.