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Iran-Tajikistan Relations Internal and External Challenges

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Iran's policies towards Central Asia have been shaped by its interest in the region's vast market, its joint cultural identity, and the involvement of competitors with similar strategic interests. Even though, known as Iran's "strategic depth", relations with the region withered post-1979 revolution. This was because of Iran's plan on exporting its revolution and conservative culture, leading to resistance in the region. Also, Iran proved incompetent in undermining global powers in the region, which were countering the Iranian role.

The post-Soviet Union period resulted in a suitable environment for Iran's expansion in Central Asia. Iran diligently began to explore new avenues for cooperation in this vital region. However, this in most cases, was unsuccessful, as Central Asian states did not incline towards Iran's ideological impulses, given their concern over Iranian hegemony.

One of the countries in which Iran had some success was Tajikistan, particularly via proselytizing in its cultural and religious domains. However, after a period of time Iran- Tajikistan relations severed and reached the level of estrangement.

This study aims to discuss the reality of the Iranian role in the Central Asian states, and its political and economic ambitions, in what is known as its "heart"- Tajikistan. Also, the study analyzes relations between Iran and Tajikistan by discussing the determinants and goals of these relations, the points of difference and agreement between both sides, and the impact of regional and international powers on relations between the two countries.

First: Central Asia in Iran's Foreign Policy

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Iran sought to build political, economic, trade, and cultural relations with the Central Asian countries to overcome international isolation post 1979- Iranian revolution. Tehran utilized new geopolitical realities to expand its position and influence in Central Asia and the Middle East.⁽¹⁾

The Iranian decision makers tried to convince Central Asian states to warm relations with Tehran overcoming the antagonism that existed between them. Iran's political and diplomatic tactics, such as providing aid and paying attention to developmental concerns, allowed it to have a key role in⁽²⁾ this strategic region.⁽³⁾ These countries looked to regional and international powers to free them from the Soviet's, indeed, they found their way to Iran.⁽⁴⁾

Nevertheless, Iranian ideological imperatives, such as exporting the revolution, supporting Shiite groups, and political meddling raised natural concerns over the extent of openness with Tehran, resulting in various states resisting inappropriate Iranian policies.⁽⁵⁾

Iran's ideological drives failed in these Muslim republics. It tried to build trust to avert ethnic and ideological conflicts expanding into Iran, which would result in chaos, violence, and the flow of refugees.⁽⁶⁾

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Iran faced challenges to prevailing in Central Asia, with international powers supporting political liberalization processes and backing Sunni power monopolization in most of these countries. However, this did not prevent Iran from expanding in Central Asia, because of shared geographic location, history, and intersecting identities. Moreover, some Central Asian countries looked at Iran as a role model.⁽⁷⁾ For example, the Shiite sect prevailed in Tajikistan, resulting from Iranian soft power, but remained limited in the districts of Khatlon and Kolab.

The Iranian position toward conflicts in Central Asia- especially bordering conflicts- is one of the challenges in this region. Iran was a key player in the conflict between Kazakhstan and Armenia on the district of Gjirbag. It took the Armenian side in this conflict, which negatively impacted its relations with Kazakhstan. Earlier, in the nineties of the last century, Iran took the Armenian side in its conflict with Azerbaijan on the Karabakh district and prevented the Azeri refugees from getting into Iran. It also supported some rival groups and hosted them in its territory, such as the Tajik Renaissance Party. In fact, these positions resulted in a divergence between Iran and some key players in this region.

As much as Iran represents key opportunities for Central Asia, it is a source of threat to these countries. The Russians are concerned about the Iranian role in this vital region and try to stop its influence there. Also, Israel is trying to acquire a foothold in these countries to contain Iranian influence and face its nuclear program. While, the United States is trying to cut off Iranian expansion, knowing that China and India would have much more flexibility in the region.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has moved its power struggle with Iran into Central Asia and has explored ways of extending its relations with the region to avert it from becoming Iranian dominated.

Second: The development of Iran-Tajikistan Relations

Iran-Tajikistan relations have gone through three stages. The first stage started when Iran approached these countries and built trust to gain a foothold in Tajikistan- the heart of this region. Tehran played a major role in ending Tajikistan's civil war by hosting peace talks in 1997 between the Islamic Renaissance- the major opposition party in the country- and the Tajik president, Imam Ali Rahmon under the supervision of the UN, EU, Security Council, and the European Cooperation Organization.⁽⁸⁾ The second phase witnessed the expansion of Iranian influence, as it tried to fill the vacuum in Central Asia. In this stage, Iran succeeded in penetrating Tajikistan through supporting its cultural, economic, and developmental concerns, as well as utilizing hard power. The military relations between both sides witnessed a significant development. In 2011 the Tajik Defense Minister Sherali Khayrulloev, in the presence of former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad during his visit to Tajikistan, said, "In case of emergency, the armed forces of Iran can get to Tajikistan in two hours. We are two brotherly and friendly countries in the face of enemies." While President Ahmadinejad said that Iran and Tajikistan were "One soul in two bodies" and "Both countries have one common history, one culture, same traditions, and one religion that makes them inseparable."⁽⁹⁾ The third stage is the current one that witnessed a decline in Iranian influence. This was a result of when Tajik TV broadcasted a documentary for 45 minutes on August 2017 ,9, rebuking Tehran's meddling in the Tajik civil war (1997-1992).

Third: The factors impacting relations between Iran and Tajikistan

Tajikistan is of importance to Iran, given that it is a Muslim country, the Persian heritage is embedded in its citizens, and the Persian language is spoken. Also, Iran has concerns in Tajikistan over possible ethnic revolts, Turkish ethnicity and Turkish control of the country.⁽¹⁰⁾

The factors that have influenced relations between the two countries are as follows:

1- Internal Factors

A. Geopolitics

Iran's geographic location gave it a privilege over Tajikistan.⁽¹¹⁾ Tajikistan is a mountainous landlocked country in Central Asia. It is surrounded by Afghanistan in the south, Uzbekistan in the west, Kirgizstan in the north, and the People's Republic of China in the north. These factors paved the way for Iran to have a strategic advantage over Tajikistan along with its ability to impact its relations with other regional and international powers resulting from its geopolitical reality and circumstances.⁽¹²⁾

Also, Tajikistan had an impact on Iran's relations with some neighboring countries and organizations- especially those having strong political and economic influence like China, Russia, and the Shanghai Organization for Cooperation. Hence, improvement in relations with Tajikistan improved Iran's relations with these countries that seek economic and security stability in Central Asia.⁽¹³⁾

Furthermore, Tajikistan lies within the security belt Iran seeks to surround itself with to protect its national security and extensive joint borders with several countries.⁽¹⁴⁾ Also, the Persian heritage and common history is one of the important influencing factors on relations between the two.⁽¹⁵⁾

B. Identity and Demographic Composition

Most Tajik citizens belong to the Tajik group- a group that shares culture and history with the Iranian people- a very influential factor on relations between both countries. Moreover, the official language in Tajikistan is Persian that is officially known as the Tajik language. Earlier, Tajikistan had been part of the Samanid Empire until it became a Soviet client in the twentieth century named as the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic.⁽¹⁶⁾

Since the eruption of the Iranian revolution in 1979, the Iranian regime has been dedicated to expanding its influence in the Arab world, Central Asia, or in the other countries of the world. In fact, this is a Persian Safavid National project wanting to promote the Twelver Shiite sect to revive Persian glories.⁽¹⁷⁾ The present Iranians do not differ from the ancient Safavids in their thoughts, trends, and positions. Considering the joint identity factors, Tajikistan was a suitable environment in which to export and promote the Iranian project.⁽¹⁸⁾

C. The Secular Trend of Tajikistan's Regime

Islam entered Tajikistan thirteen hundred years ago. In the seventies of the last century, Tajikistan witnessed an Islamic awakening represented by the Islamic Renaissance movement that was established in 1978 by an initiative from Sheikh Abdullah Nouri. Tajikistan promoted Islamic education, built mosques, and established Quran schools. However, this awakening did not continue post-independence from the Soviet Union and with the succession of President Imam Ali Rahmon (65 years old) who pursued a secular policy. As usual, Iran found this crisis as a chance to interfere by developing its relations with the Renaissance movement, which provoked and angered the Tajik government.

Under the leadership of President Rahmon (a former Socialist Party leader) who won a fourth consecutive seven-year term in 2013, the Tajik regime strove to enforce secularism in the country. The Tajik authorities undertook certain procedures to change the identity of the country and implement secularism. As a result, the parliament passed a draft law to proactively prohibit Arabic names or names having Arabic implications in Tajikistan in 2015.⁽¹⁹⁾ Similarly, the authorities in the city of Dushanbe prohibited businessmen from importing and selling black Islamic clothing that do not have a link with Tajik culture- as stated by the government. Also, the Tajik constitutional court classified the Islamic Renaissance Party as a terrorist organization on September 29th, 2015.⁽²⁰⁾ Furthermore, the Tajik higher court sentenced twelve key members of the party from 2-8 years imprisonment and the Tajik authorities blocked tens of sites supporting the party under the pretext of it criticizing the regime and averting a civil war.⁽²¹⁾ These procedures severed relations between Iran and Tajikistan- especially after the Renaissance Party sought refuge in Iran.⁽²²⁾

2- The regional and international powers

For too long, the theories of international relations prioritized the importance of regional and international factors on relations between any two countries over internal factors. However, a change in the concept of power, has paved the way for much more analysis on internal factors. Indeed, this is relevant to when Iran-Tajikistan relations are analyzed, as they are influenced not only by regional and international factors but also internal factors. To track the international factors (international competition in Central Asia) on the relations between the two countries, we have to analyze the roles and interests of the following international players:

Turkey: Tajikistan is in the center of Turkey-Iran competition in Central Asia. Turkey shares a similar cultural background with many countries in Central Asia and post-Cold War Ankara expanded its influence – especially as the West (the US and Europe) was in need for Turkey to fill the gap left by the Soviet Union. Also Turkey was a model for these countries in both its political system and capitalist tendencies.

On the contrary, Iran introduced its religious ideological model- antagonizing the West- to these countries.

The Iranian and Turkish projects were like race horses on expanding their influence in Central Asia. However, the rapid Turkish penetration would not have been successful without American support to balance Iran, which was evident through the US 1992 decision to count on Turkey in “Operation Restore Hope” and to provide help to former Socialist Republics in Central Asia and Caucasia.⁽²³⁾

By improving relations with the Central Asian countries, Iran targeted to expand its regional influence and break out of isolation and international sanctions. On the contrary, Turkey sought to make up for its failure to join the European Union with a Turkish strategy targeting the revival of its existence and relations in its historical spheres of influence, as witnessed during the time of the Ottoman Empire. Hence, rivalry between Iran and Turkey was not confined to existence and political influence only, but they competed on economic interests and building strategic depth to serve their respective goals and interests.⁽²⁴⁾

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Iran strove to infiltrate some countries to promote its religious ideology and beliefs by supporting its proxy groups. At the same time, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia worked to corner Iranian activities by fortifying the Sunni states to prevent them falling into Tehran’s orbit. To face the Iranian role in the Sunni states, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia built strong political and diplomatic relations with Tajikistan officially on January 1992 ,11. This was a few months post-independence on September 1991 ,9.

The Saudi policy materialized by the visit of former Saudi Foreign Minister, Saud Al-Faisal to the Tajik capital Dushanbe on February 1992 ,21 when he met its former President, Rahmon Nabyev and many senior officials in the country.⁽²⁵⁾ Also, Tajik President, Imam Ali Rahmon, visited the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia four times and played a major role in building and improving relations and multilateral cooperation between the two countries.⁽²⁶⁾

The Kingdom improved relations with Tajikistan in several fields- especially in combatting crime, education, science, technology, youth, sports, and air communication. They also signed an important agreement in the fields of economics, trade, investment, technology, culture, sports, and youth affairs.

Also, the Saudi Development Fund financed Tajik infrastructure projects knowing that the Tajik government had been cooperating with the Saudi Fund since 2002. Throughout these years, both countries signed seven agreements worth 122 and 120 Million Saudi Riyal for education and health development, as well as road construction.⁽²⁷⁾

Also, Tajikistan and Saudi Arabia established the Saudi-Tajik Business Council that holds annual meetings and reports to the Saudi Chambers of Commerce. It held its first session on June 2011 ,27 in Dushanbe, the Tajik capital.⁽²⁸⁾ By using this

approach- economic cooperation- the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia tried to resist Iran to prevent the spread of its ideology in this Sunni country.

In fact, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia played a balancing developmental, political, and strategic role in Tajikistan in the face of the Iranian threat and role, which aimed to monopolize this vital country.

Russia: historically, Central Asia was a theatre for Russia-Iran conflicts. Tajikistan- the heart of this region- was a member in the regional Russian-led economic and military coalitions. Also, Tajikistan joined the Eurasian Economic Group, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization that were and continue to be dominated by Russia. It also signed an agreement with Russia to keep the Russian military base '201' in Tajikistan until 2042, along with supplying Tajikistan with various military and technical equipment.⁽²⁹⁾

The importance of Central Asia for Russia lies in the fact that it represents the geopolitical key to controlling the world. The control of this region means an easy and affordable link to its vital depth to the north, the Chinese vital depth to the southeast, the vital depth of the Indian Sub-Continent, and the vital depth of the whole Caspian Sea to the west.⁽³⁰⁾

The Russian foreign policy towards Central Asia has various priorities, such as preserving its status as a super power and a major player in the region, while securing the Russian borders with these countries.⁽³¹⁾ According to the Collective Security Treaty a Russian-led military coalition supplies training to ex-Soviet republics via military exercises on the borders between these countries. In April 2015, this coalition announced plans to build a rapid deployment force in Tajikistan to counter terrorists from breaking into the country.⁽³²⁾

The evolution of extremist groups and the growth of regional rivalry- especially between Turkey and Iran- drove Russia to keep military bases in Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan, and Turkmenistan. This was within the framework of international rivalry on militarizing Central Asia.⁽³³⁾

Also, economic and military motives are key factors in understanding Russian interest in this region. Economically, these countries are strongly linked to the Russian economy. Russian exports and imports are of great importance to them. Also, the domination over oil, gas, mineral, and agricultural resources, leads to control over supplies to Russia, China, the Indian Sub-Continent, and the EU. The region has tremendous amounts of oil reserves, natural gas, and coal. Tajikistan has huge uranium mines that were discovered in the thirties of the last century.⁽³⁴⁾

Militarily, Russia tried to disarm the Central Asian countries and did its best to prevent disseminating experiences and nuclear materials to other countries.⁽³⁵⁾

As for cultural, educational, and scientific cooperation, the University of Moscow and the National University for Research and Technology have a branch in Dushanbe

within the Moscow Institute for Energy. About 5000 Tajik students study in Russian universities, while the Tajik Russian Slovak University in Dushanbe has about 4330 students.⁽³⁶⁾

Given Russia's great influence on these countries, Iran has a real challenge in expanding its influence in this region, knowing that many of its political, economic, and security interests converge with Russian interests. While Iran tries to attract these countries to improve bilateral relations, Russia considers them as vital and strategic to its interests. On the other hand, Turkey-Russia coordination on certain crises does not reflect on the inclinations of the two countries toward Central Asian countries.

The United States: since the eruption of the Iranian revolution in 1979, enmity has dominated Washington-Tehran relations. The US believes the Iranian regime is a threat to its interests in neighboring countries and has pursued a policy of sanctions and isolation to exert pressure on the Iran to- at least- change its behavior. Iran believes the US is behind all Iranian crises. In fact, the US existence in the region post-Soviet Union surrounded Iran at its eastern borders. The US improved its relations with the Central Asian countries and maintained its existence on the Iranian eastern borders. This existence was strengthened post Afghanistan invasion in 2001 and the growing war on terrorism. The Iranian concerns are natural given Central Asia is one pillar of US hegemony in, with it designing new military, economic, and security arrangements in this strategic region.⁽³⁷⁾ Indeed, Tajikistan was the first country in the region to sign an agreement to give a transit route to NATO and International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) to Afghanistan.⁽³⁸⁾

The main goal for the US movement in the region was oil. The United States penetrated this region to monopolize oil and gas resources, as it has done in the Gulf and the Middle East. The US has utilized this advantage in its geopolitical conflicts with the world emerging powers- especially China.⁽³⁹⁾

Also, the United States intended to contain growing Chinese power by geopolitical arrangements to hinder Chinese expansion to the west of its borders and prevent Russia expanding its influence in its former client states. It was important, as well for the United States to block Iran and deprive it from benefiting from its strategic geopolitical location connected to Central Asia at its eastern borders.⁽⁴⁰⁾

China: Iran has strong relations with China unlike its relations with the United States. It counts on China as a balancing power to the United States- especially in Central Asia and signed joint economic projects.

The Chinese rational movement towards Central Asian is not a threat to Iran. On the contrary, this Chinese role is required by Tehran to have a competitor partner to the United States. China seeks expansion of its economic influence in the region through its Silk Road project that will link this vital area with Europe.⁽⁴¹⁾ To do this, China has resolved all difficulties in the face of this goal. In 2012, it resolved the

disputed territories with Tajikistan and gave it about one thousand kilometers of Chinese lands to draw borders between the two countries in exchange of certain economic privileges. Also, both countries made an agreement to build an oil refinery in south Tajikistan by the Chinese Dong Yang Company.⁽⁴²⁾

Many observers believe that China pursued this policy for security issues. It tried to create safe areas along its borders with Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan because the major concern for China was radical movements in this region that could destabilize the self-governing Sheng Yang district of the Uyghur region.⁽⁴³⁾ In addition, China built a coalition against terrorism with Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan to improve cooperation to face the growing terrorist threat. Indeed, China urged all these countries for stronger military and security cooperation.⁽⁴⁴⁾

Fourth: Iran's Tools for Influence in Tajikistan

Tehran is one of the first countries of the world to have opened an embassy in Tajikistan post-independence from the Soviet Union in 1992. It also made big investments in the infrastructure of this country.⁽⁴⁵⁾ A significant number of Tajik Muslims in its capital and other cities were influenced by Shiism, as Iran's embassy and the branch of the Iranian Al-Huda library in Dushanbe carried out relief work.⁽⁴⁶⁾

Iran funded a branch for the Khomeini Charitable Foundation, the Iranian Cultural Center, along with branches for many other institutions in Dushanbe and other cities. These institutions acquired legal and institutional status and took over an important social role.⁽⁴⁷⁾

Iran established cultural centers to sponsor its beliefs and ideology like "Iranian" in the city of Khujand that- before it was closed- handled the distribution of books, holding cultural contests, providing internet services for people, and arranging youth visits to Iran.⁽⁴⁸⁾

Most Tajik students who studied in the Iranian universities- especially in Qom University- embraced the Shiite ideology. According to activists who follow up Shiite activities in Tajikistan- the Iranian embassy in Tajikistan- grants annual scholarships to more than fifty students to study in Qom University and learn the Shiite ideology. They also translate and distribute Shiite books for free and organize collective wedding parties for sons and daughters of Shiite families.

The Iranian charitable activities in Tajikistan rely on pure Iranian organizations, such as the Iranian Cultural Center, the Universal Huda Library, and the Iranian Red Crescent.⁽⁴⁹⁾

Also, Iran and Tajikistan worked together to open a branch for the Iranian Open University- that was considered one of the most successful Iranian educational projects in the country. The total number of Tajik students enrolled in this university amounted to 700 thousand students.

This came after Iran had succeeded in penetrating the only Islamic university

in the country by appointing Taj Uddin Isam Addinouv, as president. He graduated from the Shiite University of Mustafa in Qom. Later, twenty-seven of the university professors were expelled for accusations of communicating with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Then, some Iranian supporters started changing the educational curriculum in this Sunni university, replacing it with new one prepared in Qom, turning this Sunni institution into a Shiite university. Also, those that converted to Shiism utilized their networks to acquire decision making positions in the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Tajikistan. This resulted in the Sunni sect being limited and the promotion of Shiism in the country. For example, thirteen translations of Islamic books into Tajik language for Sunni scholars such as, Ibn Taymiyyah, Imam Muhammad Abdul Wahab, Sheikh Ibn Baz, Sheikh Ibn Uthaymeen, Sheikh Saleh Al-Sheikh, and Sheikh Albani were banned by a ministerial decree in Tajikistan.⁽⁵⁰⁾

Iran signed multi-bilateral agreements like the Memorandum of Understanding to exchange students and university professors between Tajikistan and the Iranian province of Hamadan.⁽⁵¹⁾ It established the Farsi Language Organization in February 1992 that included Tajikistan, and Afghanistan and funded teaching Persian in colleges and universities. Furthermore, Tehran established the Political and International Institute that is affiliated to Iran's Foreign Ministry, which is a specialist center for studying Central Asia and Caucasias, it holds an annual summit for discussing regional issues, and releases a quarterly journal titled "Central Asia and Caucasias."⁽⁵²⁾

According to the official statements of the Iranian Foreign Ministry, Iran carried out several Tajik infrastructure projects like Sangatoudah2 Hydroelectric Plant, the strategic tunnel of Anzab, and Ibn Sina (Avicenna) hospital and provided medical services through the Iranian Red Crescent Association. It also established sports centers, renovated historic buildings, built tens of educational, technical, and vocational centers in Tajikistan.⁽⁵³⁾

In the same context, Iran's former ambassador in Tajikistan, Hojatollah Fagani revealed that %80 of Iran's exports to Tajikistan are non-oil exports including constructional products, carpets, medications, food and health products.⁽⁵⁴⁾ The Deputy Head of Iran's Railroads, Hassan Mousavi revealed that there was an agreement between Iran and the countries of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan to construct a railroad to link these countries and facilitate transporting goods between Asia and Europe.⁽⁵⁵⁾

Tehran sought to revive the activities of the Economic Cooperation Organization established in 1985 that included Turkey and Pakistan. It also held talks to make Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kirgizstan join this organization. Indeed, Iran's decision makers sought to turn this organization into a huge Islamic market including 250 million people on a four million square meter land.⁽⁵⁶⁾

Fifth: The reasons behind a decline in Iran-Tajikistan relations

1- Reasons related to both countries

These reasons in a decline in relations between the two can be summarized as; accusations of Iranian meddling in the Tajik civil war, the secularity of the Tajik regime, Iran's sponsorship of the Tajik Renaissance Party, hosting its leaders in Tehran, and a financial dispute involving the Iranian businessman Babak Zanjani who keeps his wealth in Tajik banks. The controversial documentary produced in cooperation with the Tajik Foreign Ministry- relating to Iranian meddling in Tajik's civil war levied various accusations towards Tehran such as bankrolling diplomatic assassinations, the involvement of its diplomats in illegal activities and it provoking civil war in Tajikistan by supplying the Tajik Islamic Renaissance party with money and training some of its militants in Iran.⁽⁵⁷⁾

Stemming from this documentary, the Iranian embassy shut down its commerce and cultural representation offices in north Tajikistan and the Tajik authorities banned the distribution of Khomeini's and other prominent clerical books in the country.⁽⁵⁸⁾ Earlier, the Tajik authorities closed the offices of the Khomeini Supply Association, the Iranian Cultural Consultancy, and the joint hospital for the Tajik-Iranian Red Crescents in Dushanbe.

Also, the secular tendency pursued by President Rahmon's regime played a major role in increasing tensions between Iran and Tajikistan. As a regional country, Iran is ruled by Shiite political Islam and was a point of fear and watchfulness by the Tajik regime that approved a different agenda from that of Iran, which hindered strong relations between both countries.⁽⁵⁹⁾

The Iranian invitation to the leader of the Tajik Islamic Renaissance Party- prohibited in Tajikistan- Muhiddin Kabiri to attend the Islamic Unity Summit in December 2015 in Tehran increased tensions between the two countries, with Kabiri attending the Summit as a special guest and meeting the Iranian Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei in Tehran. This was considered as a challenge for the Tajik government and was Iran's reaction to its rapprochement with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

In addition, the money and real estate in Tajikistan belonging to the imprisoned Iranian businessman in Tehran, Babak Zanjani has been a point of disagreement between both sides. The Iranian judiciary sentenced Zanjani to death for embezzlement of state money. Zanjani was accused of selling oil with a value of 1\$ billion during the international sanctions and not depositing this money into the state's coffers. Iran's Oil Ministry said that Zanjani had deposited the money in the Tajik banks, which was denied by Dushanbe.⁽⁶⁰⁾

2- The reasons related to regional and international powers

The international powers would not have left Iran as the sole player in the Muslim-majority Central Asian region that enjoys a strategic geographic location

with huge amounts of natural resources. Its geographic location, capabilities, and oil transportation networks are all important factors that makes it the world's strategic center point on energy security.⁽⁶¹⁾ Iran's cultural and religious activities to spread Shiism- especially in Tajikistan- made the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia resist Iranian penetration in the region. As a result, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia gained an economic and cultural foothold in Tajikistan and did not leave it alone in the face of Iranian threats. On the contrary, Saudi Arabia competed with Iran in establishing universities and other institutions in Tajikistan.

Turkey's shared culture and religion with most Central Asian countries, has made it play a central economic and political role to corner Iranian ambitions in this region. This was supported by the Muslim world's view on the moderate Turkish model, along with the economic factors that make Turkey a major player in this region. Hence, it can be said that the regional and international competition in this region prevented Iran from being the sole player in Central Asia including Tajikistan.

Despite the Central Asian countries maintaining good political and economic relations with Iran after the Cold War, these relations were significantly restricted because of Iran's regional and international isolation. In addition, the policies of the other major countries like Russia and china also constrained Iran's agenda in this region.⁽⁶²⁾

The United States strove to thwart Iran's role in Central Asia by restricting the economic and commercial connections between these countries and Iran. This accomplished the US embargo on Tehran, as it blocked Iran from the east after it had achieved this from the west and at the Arabian Gulf, and deprived Iran from being the passage of transporting energy- oil and gas- supplies from Central Asia and the Caspian Sea, thus containing the Iranian Shiite project.⁽⁶³⁾

Also, Russia hindered Iran's attempts to individually take on Tajikistan. Moscow is strongly present in Tajikistan militarily, economically, educationally, and culturally resulting from its concern of these Muslim countries turning into ideological states- on Iran's model- this pursuing policies that might harm Russian strategic interests in the region.

Like Russia, China is very present in Central Asia and keen to prevent Iran from taking over Tajikistan for similar concerns, relating to national security, in particular in its self-governing Chinese Shenyang district on the borders of Central Asia.

Conclusion

In a certain period, Iran succeeded to penetrate Tajikistan culturally by student exchange programs and service-oriented social institutions. However, this penetration was not accompanied by significant political and economic influence for internal and external circumstances. Internally, there is contradiction between the Sunni majority in Tajikistan and Iran's Shiite ideology. The secular elite in Tajikistan,

headed by the Tajik president, were anxious over Iranian conservative culture and its ideology entering their country.

Externally, the regional and international powers (i.e. Russia, the US, China, and Turkey) ambitions to expand their influence in this region and compete with Iran --if not excluding it- and the sanctions on Tehran significantly curbed Iran's role in Central Asia.

All in all, there are two possible scenarios for Iran-Tajikistan relations. The first scenario is to go back to rapprochement, understanding, and resolving the current crisis between the two countries. To achieve this, Iran must work to overcome the Tajik governments concerns relating to Iranian support to the opposition Islamic movement that is banned in Tajikistan. Also, Iran has to build trust with the government, so it is comfortable that Iran's aims are purely humanitarian and economic and not political in Tajikistan. In addition, Tehran has not to proselytize Shiite ideology, its conservative culture, and to reconcile with secular powers in Tajikistan that are hostile to Iran. Nevertheless, the Iranian behavior and ideological tendencies of its regime exclude this scenario, knowing that Iran will never compromise or give up its expansionist ambitions in Central Asia.

The other scenario, which is more likely to happen, is to continue tensions between both countries. The programs of both countries contradict one another. Iran tried to change the Tajik view and maintain strong cultural ties with Tajikistan, but the reality proved the opposite. Iran failed to turn rapprochement with Tajikistan into political influence. The relative political influence and strong partnership it gained over the past years was lost due to the current crisis between both countries. Also, the international powers have interest in excluding Iran from Tajikistan and Central Asia. These countries have the capabilities and tools that enable them to realize their goals. The most important Iranian approach in penetrating Tajikistan has been via religion and culture, resulting in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Turkey curbing Iran's ambitions and weakening it's influence in Tajikistan.

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