

# **IRAN-TURKEY RIVALRY IN CENTRAL ASIA**

**Ghady Hassan Kandeel**

Political science researcher

## **Introduction**

At this critical point in time, international attention is now diverted toward Central Asia following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban's takeover of the country. International as well as regional attention has been increasing toward this somewhat long-neglected region, which is included in the Turkish and Iranian expansionist strategies as both countries compete to control the region's resources. Part of the Iranian government's policy is to take advantage of Central Asia's economic benefits, especially after Iran was given full membership to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in September 2021. This membership aligns with Tehran's plan of economic openness toward Central Asia. However, Iran's policy toward this region faces a prominent challenge from Turkey in light of Ankara's active role in disputes in the region, particularly over spheres of influence. Though it does not share geographical borders with Central Asia, Turkey has been working tirelessly to invest in various fields to achieve its desired influence. If Turkey succeeds in strengthening its economic and political ties with the Central Asian countries, it will advance its status as a formidable regional power.

Given the aforementioned, it is apparent that Central Asia has turned into a new arena of competition between Iran and Turkey like Syria, Libya, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea. Thus, it is necessary to analyze Iranian and Turkish motivations for advancing their economic, geographical and cultural ties with the Central Asian countries as well as to shed light on their desire to assume a leading role in the region. The latest shifts in Central Asia clearly highlight the complexities of the Iran-Turkey rivalry over different spheres of influence – despite their distinct political, economic and geographical features and a host of economic and political challenges hindering their expansionist plans and minimizing their options in the region. The question of importance concerns the nature of the Iran-Turkey rivalry in Central Asia. To answer this question, one needs to compare their ambitions in the region as well as to ascertain the level of their interests within their overall strategy to expand their influence in the region. The study also analyzes their bilateral relations in light of their common and intersecting interests and the potential opportunities and challenges that could arise as a result of their relationship.

### **The Significance of Central Asia to Iran and Turkey**

Scholars of political geography have been unable to agree on a definition of Central Asia; however, they have agreed on the point that it is located in the heart of Asia. They also have different descriptions of Central Asia. The region is made up of five Muslim majority countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan (see Map 1). This explains the reason behind adding the suffix “stan” to this region, also known as “East Turkestan.” Despite the debate over the exact geographical boundaries of Central Asia, its strategic significance — amid a host of influential regional and international blocs — is recognized by all. Its strategic significance stems from its geographical location, directly bordering Russia, China and Iran and its proximity to the Indian subcontinent. It occupies a vast territory, approximately 4 million square kilometers. This has prompted major powers to establish bases there to protect their interests in the Central Asian countries. Eight foreign bases have been established in the region: four in Tajikistan (two Russian bases, one Indian and one French), two bases in Uzbekistan (a US base and a German base), two bases in Kyrgyzstan (a Russian base and a US base). The latter was inaugurated in late 2001 and played an integral role in US counterterrorism operations in the region since it is located close to the Russian, Chinese, Afghan, and Iranian borders.<sup>(1)</sup>

At the economic level, the Caspian Sea is located west of the broad steppes of Central Asia, a vital sea rich with energy resources. In addition, it has gas and oil pipelines stretching from the Middle East via the Caspian Sea to China and via the Black Sea to Turkey and the Mediterranean countries, and via

Iran to the Arabian Gulf. The Central Asian countries possess vital resources such as oil, gas, fresh water, large reserves of minerals, cotton, and coal. This makes it one of the richest regions in the world. The region's oil reserves are approximately 150 billion barrels, representing 27 percent of the world's oil reserves. Its gas reserves exceed 75,000 square barrels, accounting for 34 percent of the world's gas reserves. Tajikistan alone holds 60 percent of the region's water springs and has a huge industrial zone, including heavy and light military industries.<sup>(2)</sup>

In light of its geostrategic significance, Central Asia has turned into an epicenter for regional and international actors to compete with one another for greater influence in the region. This region has also faced many political and economic crises that have impacted the legitimacy of the political systems in the five Central Asian countries, opening the door for intense competition between actors, especially between Iran and Turkey.

**Map 1: Central Asia's Location**



Source: The Colombo Plan.<sup>(3)</sup>

After declaring their independence from the former Soviet Union, the Central Asian countries took ownership over their vast energy resources which opened the door for competition among regional and international actors. According to Iran, the independence of the Central Asian countries greatly altered the dynamics in its geopolitical sphere; it granted Tehran a unique strategic location with new privileges. As the five Central Asian countries are landlocked, Iran exploited this reality, and offered its territories to act as a transit corridor for the New Silk Road to access the open seas. Hence, these

countries began to depend on Iranian ports to access international waters. This is how Iran created strategic depth in this highly competitive region.

Iran invested in the pipelines that pass through its own territory to the Caspian Sea. Iran also transits Turkmenistan's and Kazakhstan's oil to its northern provinces for domestic consumption and exports a similar amount to its southern ports for the Central Asian countries. Iran sought to invest in its infrastructure to transit Central Asia's energy resources to the Arabian Gulf and then to international markets. As a result, Iran secured economic benefits and established tangible trade advantages from its partnerships with the five Central Asian countries. Therefore, Iran is likely to enjoy a new economic breakthrough despite its current political and economic isolation.<sup>(4)</sup>

As for Turkey, Central Asia is a vital geopolitical variable which will pave the way for its expansion into Turkmenistan and movements toward Russia's southern borders. Entrenching its influence in Central Asia helps Turkey to access Russia's strategic depth easily and cheaply from the north, and China's strategic depth on its eastern and southern fronts. Furthermore, it allows it to access the Indian subcontinent to the south and the whole strategic depth of the Caspian Sea on its western flank.

Turkey's control over Central Asia's resources means that it controls the region's supplies of gas, oil, minerals, and agricultural items to Russia, China, the Indian subcontinent, and the European Union. Ankara is keen to strengthen its relations with the Central Asian countries in order to benefit from their vast energy resources and to end its dependence on Russia's energy — Turkey imports 60 percent of its gas and oil from Russia. Washington supports Turkey's goal through providing political support for the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Oil Pipeline (BTC) which transits oil and gas from Turkey and avoids passing through Iranian and Russian territories. Turkey's energy independence helps it to compete more effectively with its rivals in the region.<sup>(5)</sup>

### **Turkey's Strategic Tools to Dominate Central Asia**

Turkey has been working to strengthen its influence in Central Asia after it cemented its influence in Syria, Libya, the Eastern Mediterranean, the Black Sea, and the Caucasus to prove to Washington that it can be a reliable/effective ally in the region. Iran has adopted an unconventional approach toward regional security; it sought to halt any attempts by regional or international actors to secure any cultural or ideological clout in its geographical sphere of influence, i.e., Central of Asia. Each of the two rivals, Iran and Turkey, deploy a host of tools to secure their respective interests in Central Asia as follows:

#### **Iran's Approach to Enhance Its Influence in Central Asia**

In the Central Asian countries, Iran has not employed its usual tool: exporting the 1979 revolution. Instead, it has focused on providing technical and financial

support to expand its cultural ties. Iran, by doing so, has aimed to move closer to the five Central Asian countries that are known to be concerned about its theocracy and attempts to destabilize Middle Eastern governments. To allay their concerns, Iran has adopted a different approach.<sup>(6)</sup>

Iran's new approach toward the Central Asian countries is as follows. First, Iran has exploited the common religious and cultural dimensions to forge move closer to the five Islamic countries. Iran, here, mainly aims to place pressure on the United States and its allies in the region. Second, Iran has sought to enhance its foreign relations with these countries after it realized that its religious rapprochement triggered deeper fears of a potential increase in its role in Central Asia. Third, Iran has adopted a realistic approach by boosting economic cooperation and strengthening mutual interests.<sup>(7)</sup>

Iran, therefore, has deemed itself to be a competent power to take on a new leading role in Central Asia. It has exploited its geographical location and rapprochement with the five countries. Iran's unique geographical location provides the Central Asian countries with safe access to the Arabian Gulf and the Sea of Oman, given that it shares the coastlines of the energy rich Caspian Sea with Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. Iran provides the Central Asian economies with the safest, fastest, and least-costly route to international markets.<sup>(8)</sup>

The economic factor plays a prominent role in Iran's relations with the Central Asian countries. Iran has sought to heavily invest in infrastructure, especially in Tajikistan, and to revive the activities of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) – an intergovernmental organization founded in 1985. Iran also led talks to include Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in the organization. The organization aims to strengthen cooperation and coordination between Iran and the Central Asian countries — the strategically significant and oil rich countries.

To achieve economic cooperation, Iran built a railway connecting Central Asia with its railway networks and the Port of Bandar Abbas on the Arabian Gulf. It also opened the door for transit trade with the five countries.<sup>(9)</sup> In September 2021, Iran entered the SCO as a full member. The SCO was founded in 2001 as a transcontinental organization aiming to address political, economic and security issues throughout Eurasia. This paved the way for Iran to strengthen its political, economic, and cultural ties with the region's countries.

Iran's relationship with each Central Asian country differs widely. Foremost is Iran's relations with Kazakhstan. The various projects established by Iran in Kazakhstan have no doubt strengthened its influence in the country, especially in shipping and oil. Kazakhstan is one of Iran's largest grain exporters and it hopes to expand the scope of its distribution through maritime shipping and

the establishment of distribution centers in Iranian ports. Kazakhstan also deems Iran as a significant partner in Central Asia; it focuses on Iran's pivotal role in the region as well as its need to advance bilateral economic relations.<sup>(10)</sup>

Tajikistan is the most crucial Central Asian country for Iran's expansionist ambitions. Iran exploits the shared cultural and demographic relations with the Tajiks — given the fact that the majority of the Tajik population is Muslim and of Persian origin. Their number is quite considerable compared to the other Central Asian populations. Tajikistan's official language is Persian. This is in addition to the ethnic card in the region; Tajiks, share cultural and historical ties with Iran and support the presence of Persians in Tajikistan's government. Despite their shared ethnicity and history, their relations experienced some tensions because of Iran's efforts to spread under the guise of humanitarian aid its revolutionary ideology and Shiite thought in Tajikistan which has influenced many young Tajiks in the capital and other cities. Iran inaugurated a branch of the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation in Tajikistan's capital. After a short while, Iran established cultural centers tasked with spreading its ideology through attracting Tajik youngsters, distributing books, organizing cultural competitions, and supporting visits of Tajik youngsters to Iran.<sup>(11)</sup> Tehran's efforts in Tajikistan faces a challenge; Turkey as it attempts to entrench its influence in the country through strengthening bilateral ties in various fields namely; trade, culture, security, and education. Iran has also sought recently to be a broker in the border conflict between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and called on the two warring parties to resolve the conflict and resume talks to demarcate the border.<sup>(12)</sup>

As for Uzbekistan, Iran has relied on their shared history and culture to deepen bilateral relations and encourage mutual investments. Their trade volume increased slightly to 2.5 percent compared to 2020. Despite Uzbekistan's reluctance toward Iran, Tehran is still keen to boost its relations with the country in all fields: economy, trade, investments, shipping, transportation, and transit. Uzbekistan is concerned about the existence of any competitive regional power in its territories, especially Iran because of its revolutionary ideology. Uzbekistan's government is very keen to uphold strong relations with the United States, so it cannot establish similar strong relations with Washington's rival, Tehran.

As for Turkmenistan, Iran considers this country to be its main ally in Central Asia. It strengthened its trade ties and has become Turkmenistan's sixth largest trading partner. Tehran also signed 100 agreements with Ashgabat in variant fields. The two countries concluded a comprehensive cooperation agreement and agreed to re-open a truck transit road at four border checkpoints. However, recently Turkmenistan adopted an anti-Iran policy; it consistently levies tariffs on gas exports to Iran, imposes strict

policies on its Shiite minority and supports the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan. Iran still cannot instigate any significant backlash against Turkmenistan since it is a prominent partner and Iran's main entry point into Central Asia.<sup>(13)</sup>

As for Kyrgyzstan-Iran relations, no prominent developments have been witnessed since the start of their diplomatic relations in the 1990s. The two countries, despite Kyrgyzstan's growing relations with Turkey and Israel, have limited cooperation with Iran in the fields of transportation, customs, education and tourism.<sup>(14)</sup> Following Iran's full SCO membership, Kyrgyzstan has become more important to Iran since it is a bridge to the Far East and Eurasia.

Reviewing the aforementioned, it becomes apparent that Iran is aware of its foreign policy mistakes in the Middle East, so it changed its policy toward Central Asia. To pragmatically expand its influence, it forged economic partnerships and increased trade. Iran's economic woes minimize its options in Central Asia. Iran's international economic isolation also discourages the Central Asian countries from collaborating with it on mega energy projects. The new Iranian government, however, tirelessly tilts its policy toward Central Asia through pursuing a policy of economic openness.

### **Turkey's Strategy of Influence in Central Asia**

Turkey is thought to be an effective actor when it comes to competition for influence in Central Asia. Despite lacking direct geographical borders with Central Asia, Turkey uses its ideological, cultural and economic tools to expand its influence in the region. To achieve its agenda, Turkey has developed relations with the Central Asian countries since the dissolution of the former Soviet Union. As part of its hedging strategy for influence in the region, Turkey directly recognized the five Central Asian governments.

Turkey's strategy toward Central Asia is based on deploying a host of tools. First, Ankara has presented itself as a homeland for the peoples of Central Asia, which includes Islamic countries that enjoy political and economic importance across Asia. Furthermore, Turkey has relied on its political model when interacting with the Central Asian countries, which it claims to be secular and culturally open. The ruling systems in the five countries have sought to emulate the Turkish political system since their independence from the former Soviet Union.<sup>(15)</sup> Second, Turkey has used cultural tools; it has relied on the shared language with the Central Asian peoples. Iran used the language card in the Organization of Turkic States, formerly called the Turkic Council or the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States. The council includes four countries: Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan (observer). The council has faced scathing internal opposition in the Central Asian countries which take pride in their unique culture and identity, which are distinct from Turkish culture and identity. Turkey,

however, is still working to exploit the council to serve its own economic and trade interests in the region. Therefore, Ankara has employed soft power tools such as spreading cultural influence to increase its relevance in Central Asia. It has also used governmental and nongovernmental institutions to spread religion and entrench its influence; namely, Turkey's Directorate of Religious Affairs which has expanded its external remit to cover the Islamic nations in the Caspian region following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The directorate has become Turkey's main tool to expand its influence in the region. This is in addition to the efforts of the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), a governmental institution which aims to improve the image of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan abroad, especially in developing Islamic countries — through offering humanitarian aid and funding development projects to influence the five countries. The two institutions recruited Turkish and local clerics in the five countries to encourage loyalty to Ankara in Central Asia.

Moreover, Turkey established the Eurasian Islamic Council in 1994 to structure the relationship between Islam and governance in these countries. Despite Turkey's ambitions to impose its own vision of Islam and spread its cultural influence inside the Central Asian countries, the council's role declined as it has not held any meetings since 2012, much to Turkey's disappointment.

To spread its influence, Turkey used non-governmental institutions. First, the Nur Movement (Nurçuluk) founded by Said Nursi (1876-1960) has been active across the Central Asian countries except for Uzbekistan — which denied it access to the country. The Hizmet Movement led by Muhammed Fethullah Gülen is the most active and successful of Turkey's religious organizations in Central Asia; it focuses on offering scholarships and carries out charity work on a large scale for the youth in the region. The movement also established many religious schools in the poor cities of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. The Central Asian countries tried to address the growing soft power of Turkey, reflected in its increasing levels of cultural and religious activities. Most of the governments in Central Asia limited the activities of Gülen affiliated organizations as well as Turkey's Directorate of Religious Affairs. As a result, the religious activities backed by Turkey did not manage to expand in the Central Asian countries except for Kyrgyzstan which is considered the weakest of the governments in the region, so it is more vulnerable to foreign influence.<sup>(16)</sup>

Third, Turkey has focused on strengthening its economic ties with the Central Asian countries. Turkey's economic policy is based on monopolizing investment opportunities in the region, including investments in infrastructure projects and boosting trade levels given the fact that the Central Asian markets are prominent destinations for Turkish goods. The significance

of Central Asia has been increasingly growing for Turkey. If Turkey controls the trade routes in the region, it can access the land and air routes connecting the Indian subcontinent to Russia and China and eventually gain control of regional markets.<sup>(17)</sup>

However, the aforementioned soft power tools have not helped Turkey in overcoming the impediments hindering its expansion of influence in Central Asia for several reasons. First, the leaders of the Central Asian countries are not interested in the Turkish political model which claims to be democratic with open international economic markets. Second, Russia's influence in the region has proven to be stronger and more enduring compared to Turkey's. The Central Asian countries have also been shaped by Moscow's identity and culture due to their shared history. Third, Turkey faces economic hurdles and has been preoccupied with its growing economic crisis at home. The three aforementioned reasons have impeded Turkey's ability to achieve its desired economic and political supremacy in Central Asia.<sup>(18)</sup>

### **Turkey and Iran: Points of Divergence and Convergence**

Historically speaking, Iran-Turkey relations have always revolved around regional competition since the time of the Ottoman Empire. Their rivalry continued after the establishment of the Turkish republic and its efforts to enhance its influence abroad. After the 1979 revolution, their rivalry decreased as the new Iranian government back then was preoccupied with improving internal affairs in preparation for exporting its "Islamic Revolution" to its neighbors. Their rivalry, as a result, was triggered again over spheres of influence. Their relationship has had many ebbs and flows; both countries have shifted from being allies to rivals as their disagreements are quite complex.

Despite their recent disagreements over Syria, Ankara and Tehran managed to a great extent to reduce the intensity of their conflict through engaging in multi-party dialogue. A few years ago, a potential truce started to surface after Iran expressed serious objection to the July 15, 2016 coup d'état attempt. In return, Turkey criticized the 2018 protests<sup>(19)</sup> in Iran and changed its position on Iran's nuclear program — to be in line with Ankara's new regional perspectives.

The questions raised here: Has the conflict between Ankara and Tehran ended? Is there an escalation in competition over new spheres of influence, especially in Central Asia in light of regional developments (the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban takeover of the country) which have led to a change in the balance of power in the region? Turkey's new role in Afghanistan will result in it competing with Tehran for control and influence in the country. Iran, of course, will not remain motionless in Afghanistan.

The power vacuum resulting from the US withdrawal has created a sizeable opportunity for Iran to cement its influence in the country. Needless to say, Iran's attempts to replace the US presence has raised concerns as it seeks to establish greater influence in Central Asia. Turkey has been working to swiftly enhance its influence in the Central Asian countries; even in Tajikistan which has several commonalities with Iran. It is essential to analyze their points of convergence and divergence in order to accurately forecast their future relationship in Central Asia.

### **Points of Convergence**

Many determinants contributed to advancing their rapprochement, first, their shared political positions; opposition to America's role in the region, regional rivalry with the Gulf countries, and mutual support for the Palestinian cause. This is in addition to their shared geopolitical issues; their growing concerns regarding the Kurdistan Workers' Party and its allies in the region, and their opposition to Kurdish separatist ambitions that risk the unity of Iranian and Turkish territories. It is worth mentioning here that Iran and Turkey had previously cooperated at the political and operational levels to prevent the separation of Iraq's Kurdistan Region against the backdrop of the Kurdish separatist referendum. <sup>(20)</sup>

Second, their response to major crises: Turkey, over the course of history, has provided economic support to Iran amid crises. During the Iran-Iraq War, Ankara supplied Tehran with its economic needs over the course of the eight-year conflict as well as when Iran faced impediments in the Arab Gulf because of maritime traffic problems. In 2012, Turkey played a vital role in helping Iran circumvent sanctions through a comprehensive plan (gold-for-oil and gas trade). Washington, however, quickly prevented Ankara from acting on this plan. <sup>(21)</sup>

Turkey-Iran mutual interests are evident in energy and trade; both advance their relations further. Turkey relies on Iran's gas and oil while Turkish goods are highly significant for Iranian markets. Iran's trade volume with Turkey exceeded \$6 billion in 2021 and they aim to increase it further. Therefore, they signed six memorandums of understanding in April 2021 in order to increase their trade volume to \$30 billion.

Based on the aforementioned, it is clear that Turkey uses its economic ties with Iran to access Central Asian markets while Turkey is Iran's biggest gas importer and a major oil importer as well as a main economic entry point to access in the future European oil and non-oil markets. Though Turkey is the greatest beneficiary of developing economic ties with Iran, the latter is also keen on maintaining this relationship even if it serves, largely, Turkey's interests. Relatively speaking, Turkey and Iran managed to a great extent to separate their economic ties from their regional rivalry in the past years.

Their economic cooperation has indirectly contributed to some geopolitical restraint; to maintain their mutual economic interests away from their rivalry over spheres of influence.<sup>(22)</sup>

### Points of Divergence

Despite their shared positions on some regional developments, Ankara and Tehran still have key disagreements. First, the map of strategic allies: Turkey is a significant ally of the United States; Iran's sworn enemy. Although, Ankara risked its relations with Washington by buying Russia's S-400 missile defense system and conducting field operations in Syria and Libya, it is still within the orbit of the United States. Actually, Washington still influences Ankara's foreign policy, especially in regard to Iran. For example, Turkey refrained from buying Iran's oil after April 2019 when Washington canceled the sanctions waiver granted to Ankara. So, it is apparent that Turkey's cooperation with Iran depends on US restrictions. On the other hand, Iran deems Russia a significant ally, while Moscow still has antagonistic relations with Washington. The conventional allies for both Turkey and Iran, therefore, constitute an impediment that hinder their relations and both Washington and Moscow have entered a new phase of rivalry, with Iran and Turkey to be deployed as new proxies to stretch the reach of both major powers in Central Asia.<sup>(23)</sup>

Third, their rivalry in Azerbaijan is an indication of their escalating disagreements. Azerbaijan is not one of the five Central Asian countries, but the intertwined relations between Iran, Turkey and Azerbaijan directly impact their relations in Central Asia. Iran uses the sectarian card to attract Azerbaijan while Turkey uses the ethnic card to attract it.

Turkey played a critical role in ensuring Azerbaijan won the war against Armenia in 2020, providing it with arms. Meanwhile, Iran supported Armenia, a Christian country, in its conflict with Azerbaijan; Nagorno-Karabakh is a Shiite majority region. It was expected, given their shared religion and culture, Iran would support Azerbaijan. But Iran's strategic considerations made it support Armenia to ensure that Azerbaijan will remain weak, so it cannot trigger any tensions among its Azeri population.

Iran's support to Armenia led to a decline in its relations with Ankara. While Turkey advanced its relations with Azerbaijan, it faces evident tensions with Iran because of several factors; namely Tehran's position that Azerbaijan's ruling elite is secular and loyal to the West. On the other side, Azerbaijan has accused Iran of supporting Islamist Azeris who want to topple the Aliyev government. Iran had admitted its official support for Islamist Azeris a few years ago.<sup>(24)</sup>

Another indication of the rising tensions between Iran and Azerbaijan was the latter's suggestion in the truce deal with Armenia to allow Baku to

establish a corridor in southern Armenia; this would impact Iran's economic interests as it would end the direct trade between Iran and Armenia. The new corridor located on the One Belt One Road route may risk Iran's influence in Azerbaijan, with Turkey ready to exploit the new corridor to establish a direct road link to Central Asia, leading to the formation of an alternative trade channel for energy and goods. This will definitely grant Turkey a historic opportunity to access Central Asia through Azerbaijan; eventually this access will diminish Iran's significance in the region.

Turkey's support for Azerbaijan goes beyond this new corridor; Ankara realized that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is an opportunity to advance its diplomatic, military, and technological weight as well as to expand its role in the region. Turkey has relatively exploited the victory against Armenia; it forged cooperation agreements with Azerbaijan in the fields of energy, and transporting Azeri gas to European markets via its territories in order to entice the Central Asian countries to cooperate politically and economically. It seems that Turkey has used Azerbaijan as a political card in its conflict with Iran; it believes that Tehran and Moscow are firmly blocking its project in the region, so it attempts to place some pressure on both in a new sphere of influence; Azerbaijan.<sup>(25)</sup>

Turkey's successful energy policy has been the most critical factor in boosting its influence in Central Asia — particularly in oil rich Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. This is in addition to Turkey's control over vital waterways to transit oil and gas to world markets. The Iranian-Turkish struggle for influence has many facets, and one of them is control over energy transit routes in Central Asia. The region has five major energy transit routes to the world, the majority of which depend on Iran. The United States, therefore, supports Turkey's energy efforts to access Central Asia and the South Caucasus to irritate Russia and China and to reduce Europe's dependence on Russian oil. This paves the way for Turkey's growing influence in the region.<sup>(26)</sup>

### **The Dimensions of Iran-Tukey Relations in Central Asia: Opportunities and Challenges**

Iran-Turkey relations in Central Asia are expected to face a host of scenarios. Their most prominent challenge is to boost relations with the Central Asian countries in order to attract them to their respective spheres of influence. To consolidate their influence in the region, Iran and Turkey need to adopt one of the three tracks as explained below:

#### **Competition to Spread Influence**

Their competition is fueled by many factors. The cultural bond between Tukey and the five Central Asian countries is much stronger than with Iran. Further, Turkey's role in Central Asia is supported by the United States following its

withdrawal from Afghanistan — Washington looks for a reliable actor to replace its role in the region. Iran is suffering from deteriorating economic conditions because of the US sanctions, so it aims to access Central Asia to find a way out in order to rescue its economy. Iran cannot endure further losses, particularly in Central Asia, so its competition with Turkey is likely to be quite tense in this region. <sup>(27)</sup>

### **Potential Cooperation**

It is expected that Turkey and Iran will cooperate in Central Asia in light of a host of variables, namely: the new governments in Tehran and Washington, the geopolitical developments in the South Caucasus, the Vienna talks, and Turkey's reassessment of its regional relations, particularly the revival of relations with the UAE and Israel in the past few months which indicates further openness with Iran in the future.

The potential cooperation is more likely given the latest remarks by their officials. At a joint press conference with his Turkish counterpart in Tehran in mid-November 2021, Iran's foreign minister said that Iran and Turkey had agreed on a long-term "cooperation roadmap" which would include discussions about the latest developments in Afghanistan and approaches to achieve stability and security in Central Asia. Their remarks raised many questions related to the future of relations between both countries and how they would manage to overcome all of their disputes and thorny issues and how likely it was for real cooperation to happen on the ground. <sup>(28)</sup>

### **Strategic Alliance**

Since he came to office in August 2021, Raisi realized the necessity to establish a moderate foreign policy and boost diplomatic tools to address the latest challenges facing Tehran. Raisi worked to craft a coherent foreign policy to resolve tensions with Iran's neighbors in the region. Tehran needs to develop a cooperation framework with its competitors in the region, namely Turkey. Based on this new Iranian policy to resolve foreign disputes and prioritize Iran's national interests over its historical dispute with Turkey, Tehran will likely adapt to the regional shifts in Central Asia and accept Turkey's role there.

This scenario is supported by the economic benefits that Iran may reap from its strategic relations with the Central Asian countries in case it manages to defuse tensions and cooperate with Turkey. Central Asia is of great strategic importance for Iran given its location between Russia and China; Tehran has paid maximum attention to this region in light of the unprecedented deterioration of its economic conditions. <sup>(29)</sup>

Based on the aforementioned, it becomes apparent that the factors of cooperation and competition are deeply intertwined between Turkey and

Iran in Central Asia. Both of them may be aware that they need to manage their complex relationship to evade any potential escalation that might lead to an imbalance of power between them in Central Asia, leading to looming instability across the whole region. For Iran, Central Asia does not have great political significance compared to its economic significance. Further, Russia's influence in Central Asia surpasses that of Iran and Turkey. Russia still enjoys the upper hand in the region despite Turkish and Iranian attempts to secure a foothold there. The two countries therefore are expected to boost their cooperation in the face of Russia's influence.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the aforementioned, Iran-Turkey relations are interesting to study because they fluctuate between cooperation and conflict. Their relations are riddled with ambiguities and raise questions about the drivers/impacts of their competition in Central Asia; basically, the limits of their power abroad and the extent of the influence wielded through shared identities in crafting foreign policy in respect of the latest developments in the region and their economic rivalry. Iran has sought to develop its relations with the Central Asian countries to boost its regional influence, break the international isolation it faces, and circumvent the sanctions whereas Turkey aims to compensate for its failures in other areas of conflict such as in Syria and Libya and to revive its presence and ties with its cultural surroundings. Iran-Turkey competition in Central Asia is not only about expanding their political influence but also to reap economic benefits and establish strategic depth in order to serve their national interests. Therefore, it is likely that Iran and Turkey will prioritize their national interests over their longstanding struggle for influence in the region.

## Endnotes

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