

# JIS



## Journal for Iranian Studies

*Specialized Studies*

A Peer-Reviewed Biannual periodical Journal



Year 6, Issue 15, April 2022

14

- Iran's Insistence on Uranium Enrichment: Motives and Repercussion
- Azeri-Turks of Iran: Trapped Between Geopolitics and Geo-economics
- Iran's Environmental Policymaking: Actors and Challenges
- Algerian Foreign Policy Toward Iran:  
Balancing Commitments to the Arab World With National Interests
- Iran-Turkey Rivalry in Central Asia
- Book Review / Iran's Influence in Sub-Saharan Africa



# **JOURNAL FOR IRANIAN STUDIES**

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**RASANAHA**  
المعهد الدولي للدراسات الإيرانية  
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# JOURNAL FOR IRANIAN STUDIES

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# **IRAN'S INSISTENCE ON URANIUM ENRICHMENT: MOTIVES AND REPERCUSSIONS**

**Dr. Sami al-Harby**

Researcher on nuclear affairs

## **Introduction**

In 2002, the international community was shocked when an Iranian opposition group revealed the existence of a secret Iranian nuclear program at the Natanz uranium enrichment facility and Arak heavy water reactor without the knowledge of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). This is a breach of Iran's commitments under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). After the aforementioned discovery, a long journey of negotiations and diplomatic discussions began between Western countries and Iran in which uranium enrichment played a major part. These negotiations led to the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015. Iran insists that its nuclear program is peaceful, however, its insistence on locally enriching uranium; developing centrifuges; and choosing Natanz, a rugged mountainous region, to build enrichment facilities and fortify them underground, casts doubt on the allegedly peaceful nature of its program. Moreover, its attempt to hide another enrichment facility (Fordow), and not to announce it until 2009, increased suspicions surrounding its nuclear program. The aforementioned suspicious behavior raised a question about Iran's motives for locally enriching uranium, and its ramifications for Iran, the region, and the world.

One of the cornerstones of the nuclear fuel cycle is uranium enrichment, uranium-235 is increased to uranium-238. What distinguishes the enrichment process and makes it a central issue in international agreements is the dual use of enriched uranium: peaceful or nuclear use. This duality has made the production of nuclear fuel and the use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes a very politically sensitive issue. This poses a challenge to controlling nuclear proliferation, especially since the NPT allows non-nuclear countries to produce their own nuclear fuel, as long as it is for peaceful purposes. Some countries such as India and North Korea have taken advantage of this to produce their own nuclear weapons.<sup>(1)</sup>

The Iranian nuclear crisis erupted in 2002 when an Iranian opposition group revealed a secret Iranian program to enrich uranium at the Natanz and Arak facilities without the knowledge of the IAEA.<sup>(2)</sup> This action was perceived as an indication of Iran's non-compliance with the NPT, which Tehran ratified in 1970,<sup>(3)</sup> after which the arduous process of negotiations began, culminating in the 2015 nuclear deal.

The issue of uranium enrichment is at the core of Iran's confrontation with the West,<sup>(4)</sup> which is what prolonged the aforementioned negotiations as the United States initially rejected this demand, while Iran insisted on it as a right guaranteed under the NPT. The US side shifted from "no to enrichment" during the administration of G. W. Bush to "no to the bomb" during the Obama administration.<sup>(5)</sup> This latter decision did not come until the Obama administration lost hope in the Iranians halting uranium enrichment, in addition, it wanted to avoid the worst case scenario that might arise from Iran's continual intransigence.<sup>(6)</sup>

Once Iran had obtained US consent to enrich uranium, the nuclear agreement was reached, and it did not object to making major concessions (in return for retaining the right to enrich), as the agreement restricted and legalized the enrichment process in a very significant way. But in 2018, the United States, during President Donald Trump's administration, withdrew from the agreement, and one of its main justifications was that the agreement permitted Iran to enrich uranium. This study will reveal Iran's motives for insisting on enriching uranium locally, despite all the sanctions that were imposed, and even though international guarantees secured its need for nuclear fuel, and at less cost than local enrichment. The study will also address this by taking into consideration three dimensions: strategic, political, and security. In addition, the study examines the ramifications of Iran's uranium enrichment for the country, the region, and the world. Finally, this study will shed light on the stages that the uranium enrichment program has gone through in Iran.



## **Iran's Uranium Enrichment Policy**

The beginning of the enrichment process in Iran dates back to the mid-1970s, when a small research project was established at the Tehran Nuclear Research Center, with US assistance, to enrich uranium using laser technology,<sup>(7)</sup> and enrichment did not go beyond this. Iran secured the supply of nuclear fuel for the Bushehr reactor by purchasing a 10 percent share in the Eurodif uranium enrichment company in 1975, which was a joint venture between various European countries, headquartered in France.

However, major transformations took place in the Iranian nuclear program as a whole after the Iranian revolution in 1979. Most international nuclear cooperation with Iran, including the supply of nuclear fuel, stopped, and the United States refrained from supplying the Tehran Research Reactor (TRR) with highly enriched uranium fuel. This forced Iran to shut it down temporarily, and Iranian officials were then forced to convert it into a low-enrichment reactor with the help of Argentina.

Through these events, Iranian officials became convinced of the need to build and develop Iran's own nuclear fuel cycle technology. Some sources indicate that Iran actually started a secret uranium enrichment program in the mid-1980s when it hired Pakistani nuclear scientist Abdul Qadeer Khan<sup>(8)</sup> who visited Iran at the time and offered assistance by providing enrichment technology. With the support of the then Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi, a deal was concluded between the representatives of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran and the AQ Khan nuclear network;<sup>(9)</sup> so Iran's uranium enrichment program was secretly born by obtaining technical drawings, manufacturing instructions, and samples of centrifuge components.

Iran provided the IAEA with information about the start of its nuclear cooperation with Pakistan in 2007, which included early research and development of the centrifuges obtained from Pakistan between 1987 and 1993.<sup>(10)</sup>

Between 1992 and 2002, Iran made steady progress toward industrializing its nuclear fuel cycle, and secretly carried out enrichment experiments on centrifuges installed at a facility belonging to the Kalay Electric Company<sup>(11)</sup> in violation of its obligations under the NPT.

Later, Iran admitted to the existence of its secret nuclear facilities, the Natanz enrichment facility and the Arak heavy water reactor after the National Council of Resistance of Iran exposed them in 2002. Iran claimed that they were for peaceful purposes. Then began a long journey of negotiations spanning more than a decade. The negotiations were initially undertaken by three European countries: France, Germany and Britain (the E-3 group), and they made diplomatic efforts to try to resolve the Iranian nuclear crisis. International negotiations focused on suspending Iran's enrichment activities,

and the IAEA called on Iran to suspend its enrichment activities and declare all materials and equipment connected to its nuclear program.

In November 2004, Iran agreed to stop enrichment and voluntarily signed the IAEA Additional Protocol. However, Iran adopted a tougher and more aggressive stance in the negotiations when President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad ascended to power. The Iranian authorities broke the locks placed by the IAEA on Iran's nuclear facilities and resumed uranium enrichment and succeeded in reaching a 3.5 percent enrichment rate in 2006, using more than 100 centrifuges. This caused the negotiations to be disrupted and the IAEA Board of Governors in February 2006 voted to refer the Iranian file to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) for non-compliance with the NPT Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement.

The UNSC passed a series of resolutions demanding Iran to stop uranium enrichment, and it gradually imposed sanctions on it. The first was Resolution 1696 in July 2006, demanding Iran to suspend its enrichment activities, followed in the same year by Resolution 1737, which renewed previous claims and threatened to impose sanctions in the event of non-implementation. Successive UNSC resolutions (1747, 1803, 1835 and 1929) demanded a halt in Iranian enrichment activities with more sanctions imposed on Iran. In mid-2015, the JCPOA was signed between Iran and the five permanent members of the UNSC in addition to Germany (P5+1). Subsequently, the UNSC unanimously adopted Resolution 2231 in which it supported the JCPOA and superseded the previous resolutions.

Iran approved the JCPOA to lift the economic sanctions that had burdened it. As for the P5+1 group, the goal was to delay Iran's acquisition of the fissile material needed to build a nuclear bomb.<sup>(12)</sup> Therefore, the agreement aimed to restrict uranium enrichment activities both quantitatively and qualitatively, and tighten control over Iran's nuclear facilities as well as completely halt the production of plutonium by redesigning the Bushehr reactor.

The agreement did not prevent Iran from enriching uranium; it delayed its possession of the nuclear material needed to produce a nuclear bomb from six months to a year rather than permanently thwart its efforts<sup>(13)</sup> as it succeeded in preserving its right to enrich uranium under the NPT; this was classed as a great victory for Tehran. With this agreement, Iran moved from the stage of secrecy to retaining its technical know-how to build a nuclear bomb whenever it wanted to.<sup>(14)</sup>

Iran will keep its uranium enrichment level at 3.67 percent for 15 years, and it will not be able to preserve more than 300 kilograms of its total stockpile of uranium enriched at this rate for 15 years and will keep no more than 5,060 IR-1 centrifuges at the Natanz facility for 10 years. Iran was not allowed to carry out uranium enrichment or any related research and development activities

at the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant for 15 years. With this percentage and quantity of enrichment and the number of centrifuges, Iran will not be able to obtain the fissile material needed to produce a nuclear bomb within 15 years.<sup>(15)</sup> Iran also agreed to install live cameras to monitor the enrichment process in its nuclear facilities around the clock, with the footage broadcast to IAEA inspectors for 15 years. IAEA inspectors were also allowed to enter Iran and carry out inspections at nuclear sites.

Although the JCPOA limited or curtailed significant parts of Iran's nuclear program, recognition of its right to enrich uranium is in itself an acknowledgment of its nuclear potential in the future.<sup>(16)</sup>

In May 2018, the United States, during the administration of former President Donald Trump, withdrew from the nuclear agreement with Iran, arguing that it would fail to prevent Tehran from developing a nuclear weapon once restrictions on uranium enrichment were lifted. Moreover, the agreement did not include Iran's missile program nor its regional interferences.<sup>(17)</sup> In return, the Iranian government announced that it would abandon the restrictions imposed on enriching uranium and related nuclear research and would resume enrichment using a range of advanced centrifuges, including the IR-6 which enriches uranium at a higher efficiency and speed than the IR-1 allowed under the JCPOA.<sup>(18)</sup>

Since mid-2019, Iran has worked to expand its nuclear program and it began hastening the process of enriching uranium, reaching 60 percent purity in 2021.<sup>(19)</sup> According to the latest IAEA reports, Iran's stockpile of enriched uranium has reached 3,197.1 kilograms, more than 10 times what was agreed under the nuclear agreement, including 147.8 kilograms of 20 percent enriched uranium and 23.3 kilograms enriched at 60 percent.<sup>(20)</sup> This is a dangerous escalation because the time period to reach 90 percent purity has drastically decreased, cutting significantly Iran's nuclear break-out time. This prompted IAEA Director-General Rafael Grossi to declare that "only countries that manufacture bombs are enriching to 60 percent."<sup>(21)</sup>

After the US withdrawal from the JCPOA, Iran imposed severe restrictions on IAEA inspectors from accessing nuclear sites<sup>(22)</sup> and removed the watchdog's cameras at the Karaj site where sensitive parts for advanced centrifuges are produced.<sup>(23)</sup> The United States is currently attempting to revive the JCPOA, calling on Iran to return to observing the 2015 agreement.

### **Iran's Motives for Enriching Uranium**

The Iranian government uses a range of arguments to justify its process of enriching uranium locally. It claims that one of the main reasons for this is to secure access to the nuclear fuel needed to operate its nuclear reactors, and its desire to end dependence on external sources. Iran's previous experience

in dealing with foreign countries may have had a significant impact on its decision to enrich uranium locally.<sup>(24)</sup> The United States had previously stopped supplying the TRR with nuclear fuel after its diplomats were held hostage in Iran and this forced Iran to shut down the reactor temporarily. Eurodif, with Iran owning a 10 percent stake, also refrained from sending nuclear fuel to Iran after the revolution in 1979.

However, uranium enrichment locally is not commensurate with Iran's needs, nor with its available uranium resources. Technically, Iran does not need to enrich yet<sup>(25)</sup> in light of its small number of nuclear reactors and its agreement with Russia to build nuclear reactors in Bushehr, which includes the provision of nuclear fuel. In addition, the estimates of Iran's stockpiles of uranium are in no way sufficient to supply its planned nuclear program, which includes at least seven reactors.<sup>(26)</sup> Thus, Iran will have to import uranium ore, and this means it is difficult for it to have an independent nuclear fuel cycle.

One of the justifications often stated by the Iranian government is that enriching uranium will decrease the consumption of oil and gas, thus allowing it to export more energy and increase its revenues.<sup>(27)</sup> Nevertheless, the Iranian government has failed over the years to explain the economic rationale behind its enrichment policies.<sup>(28)</sup> Iran's proven reserves of natural uranium do not exceed 7,500 tons,<sup>(29)</sup> with most of it in the high-cost category. With the low quality of domestic enrichment, the total cost of enrichment in Iran will far exceed the cost of importing it.<sup>(30)</sup> For this reason, some countries, such as Belgium and Sweden, have already decided to import enriched uranium instead of enriching it locally as a more feasible option.<sup>(31)</sup> In addition, Iran's insistence on enriching uranium locally has caused international restrictions and sanctions to be imposed on it. This has greatly impacted its economy and added to the final cost of enrichment locally. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov previously stated publicly that there is no economic justification for Iran to continue its uranium enrichment program.<sup>(32)</sup>

The justifications that Iran uses to enrich uranium locally are not convincing. By tracing the course of Iran's nuclear program, Tehran has been keen to hide its uranium enrichment facilities at Natanz and Fordow by building them underground, fortifying them with air defense systems, and installing a large number of centrifuges, approximately 20,000. Moreover, Iran converted the enriched uranium into uranium metal in early 2021,<sup>(33)</sup> which is an element needed to build a nuclear bomb.

Iran's desire to enrich uranium beyond the levels needed for civilian use has raised doubts about the true intention and nature of its nuclear program.<sup>(34)</sup> Therefore, some analysts have concluded that Iran has no realistic need for enrichment, unless its actual desire is to build or pursue the nuclear option.<sup>(35)</sup>

Historically, the factors that contributed to the spread of nuclear weapons have been very similar, primarily the spread of uranium enrichment capabilities.<sup>(36)</sup> Uranium enrichment using centrifuges was the most widely used technology in nuclear proliferation and played a central role in the production of nuclear weapons because of their small size compared to other technologies and the ease of concealment.<sup>(37)</sup> It has been an option for many non-nuclear countries that built a nuclear bomb, such as Pakistan and North Korea. Controlling nuclear proliferation has become much more difficult with developments in enrichment technology because the IAEA safeguards are not strict enough in monitoring enrichment facilities.<sup>(38)</sup> Countries that possess uranium enrichment capabilities have become “nuclear latent,” which varies according to the size and capabilities of the facilities that they own.<sup>(39)</sup>

Nuclear affairs expert at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the United States Vipin Narang divided Iran's nuclear proliferation strategy into three stages. Before the Iranian revolution, Iran followed a policy of technical nuclear precaution, which is the stage of establishment, with the country being a far distance from producing a nuclear bomb. In the 1980s to the beginning of its nuclear crisis with the West, Iran pursued a strategy of covertness and secrecy. Since the nuclear crisis to the present time, its strategy has been based on solid nuclear hedging,<sup>(40)</sup> and at this point, it acquired the technology needed to build a nuclear bomb under the cover of peaceful use.

Therefore, the statements of Iranian officials about the justifications (self-sufficiency and economic benefits) for the country's pursuit of enriching uranium locally are subject to many doubts and indicate wider concealed motives.

### **Strategic Motives**

The IAEA Low Enriched Uranium (LEU), a physical uranium stock, provides its members with low-enriched uranium, so it is not necessary for countries that are keen to secure their uranium energy needs to produce it at home — given the LEU legitimate supplies.<sup>(41)</sup> Iran claims that its uranium enrichment program — developed at home — is peaceful, yet it is keen on nuclear technology, which can quickly be converted for military purposes. Since the start of its secret uranium enrichment program in the 1980s, Iran has been keen to localize this industry, and has not sought the help of its closest allies, Russia or China, but relied on the AQ Khan network. Moreover, Iran obtained the technical base for the manufacture and development of centrifuges,<sup>(42)</sup> allowing it to develop advanced types such as IR-8, which has a faster enrichment capacity; up to 16 times faster than the centrifuge's first version,<sup>(43)</sup> thus reducing the time needed to produce highly enriched uranium for military purposes which some analysts have estimated to be about only three weeks.<sup>(44)</sup>

Here, it is clear that Iran aims at a long-term strategic dimension more than an operational one, as it is committed to possessing enrichment technology and building its national competency in this field. This indicates that Iran adopts a “nuclear hedging” strategy,<sup>(45)</sup> so that in the future it can take a political decision regarding increasing its enrichment rate, building a nuclear deterrent force, and protecting its national security whenever needed. This strategy is in force in some countries such as Japan and Germany.<sup>(46)</sup> By acquiring and maintaining enrichment technology, Iran can easily produce a nuclear bomb. The localization of enrichment technology will also ensure the sustainability of its nuclear program, as it will be able to rebuild it if any external forces destroyed it. Iran has demonstrated its ability to produce large quantities of fissile material through its activities at Natanz and Fordow, which is the most difficult stage in the development of any nuclear weapon.<sup>(47)</sup>

Iran’s “nuclear hedging” has been evident because of the secrecy of its program, its high levels of enriched uranium, and the military’s involvement in the program.<sup>(48)</sup> Iran may not aim to build a nuclear bomb now, as the consequences of political isolation and economic sanctions are greater than it can handle, but it is keeping the option available.

### **Political Motives**

Uranium enrichment brings the Iranian government several internal and external political achievements. In general, nuclear capabilities indicate important symbols of the technological progress of a modern state, reflecting its identity, and its position in the international system.<sup>(49)</sup> Iran views its success in uranium enrichment as reflecting its position in the international system and the capabilities of its people.<sup>(50)</sup> The Iranian government depended on a broad internal consensus to develop its nuclear capabilities and move forward with uranium enrichment. The Iranian government played on identity issues and defending the independence of Iran from the “unfair restrictions” imposed by the international community. An opinion poll found that the majority of Iranians considered it important for Iran to have a full nuclear program. Uranium enrichment provided the Iranian government with popular support and political legitimacy to serve its ideology.<sup>(51)</sup>

In terms of foreign policy, uranium enrichment provided Iran with international momentum, ended its isolation, improved its global position, and led it to the negotiating table with world powers.<sup>(52)</sup> Enrichment has become an asset for Iran to achieve its political ends and extend its influence in the region.<sup>(53)</sup> A number of analysts believe that the purpose of Iran’s nuclear program, at the moment, is not to produce a nuclear weapon, but that the Iranian government is using uranium enrichment as a pressure tool to achieve political and economic concessions. The former US Secretary of State

Henry Kissinger believes that Iran's possession of some nuclear technology (nuclear potential) enhances its influence in the Middle East.<sup>(54)</sup>

### **Security Motives**

The decision to obtain nuclear technology for military purposes is often driven by security considerations.<sup>(55)</sup> Uranium enrichment capabilities either represent a stepping-stone toward developing a nuclear weapon, or act as a deterrent, as a nuclear potential state can deter opponents by using the nuclear card in response to military escalation or nuclear blackmail.<sup>(56)</sup>

Since its inception, Iran has faced three nuclear neighboring states (Israel, Pakistan and India), while Iraq allegedly had an arsenal of "weapons of mass destruction" that could have been used against Tehran during the first Gulf War.<sup>(57)</sup> The aforementioned is in addition to the US presence in the Arabian Gulf and its tense relations with Tehran since the Iranian revolution. The combination of international isolation and Saddam's use of chemical weapons during the 1980s were key events for the Iranian leadership and may have convinced it of the need to develop an unconventional deterrent force to balance the threats surrounding Iran. Therefore, the decision was made at that time to develop nuclear capabilities and enrich uranium.<sup>(58)</sup> Iran will be ready and able under any circumstances to increase its enrichment rate and build a nuclear bomb by possessing enrichment technology. Iran has already exceeded the rate of uranium enrichment needed for peaceful purposes.<sup>(59)</sup> Thus, uranium enrichment represents a "virtual deterrent force" for Iran,<sup>(60)</sup> and a kind of "nuclear hedging" that will enhance its political position and military power, and safeguard its security and sovereignty.

Regional security and its determinants are the key driving factors behind Iran pursuing the military nuclear path, and it still chooses to keep the option of nuclear weapons open despite the demise of the Iraqi threat after the elimination of Saddam Hussein in 2003.<sup>(61)</sup>

### **The Ramifications of Uranium Enrichment**

Iran's insistence on enriching uranium locally has ramifications which will impact Iran, the region, and the world. The first ramification impacts Iran itself. Iran's uranium enrichment program has led to heavy economic sanctions on the Iranian government, with their severity increasing because of the secret nature of the nuclear program and its nuclear facilities. The construction of a clandestine enrichment facility near Natanz buried underground with 25 feet of cement and concrete consumed all the cement that Iran produced at the time.<sup>(62)</sup> Its insistence on enriching uranium prompted Western intelligence agencies to target the country, and also led to acts of sabotage, including the launch of the first cyberwar of this century, with the Natanz uranium enrichment facility targeted in 2010 with the Stuxnet virus, known

in intelligence circles as the “Olympic Games.” The virus damaged about 11 percent of the centrifuges at Natanz, <sup>(63)</sup> leading to the temporary halt of most enrichment activities. The aim of the Stuxnet operation was to delay the enrichment program, giving Western countries breathing space in order to find solutions to deal with the Iranian nuclear program. The attack was denied by all parties, but suspicion was cast over Israel and the United States. <sup>(64)</sup> The acts of sabotage also included the assassination of Iranian nuclear scientists, most notably the nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, who was killed on November 27, 2020.

Iran’s enrichment program provided its adversaries, such as the United States and Israel, a justification for launching preemptive attacks to destroy the infrastructure of its nuclear program. <sup>(65)</sup> Iran openly and provocatively as well as defiantly, despite international pressures, implements an ambitious and sophisticated uranium enrichment program. <sup>(66)</sup> In April 2021, the Natanz facility was targeted with a deliberate explosion which partially damaged it. The Israeli government was accused of being behind this explosion and that it had escalated its secret war against Tehran’s nuclear weapons program. <sup>(67)</sup>

Allowing Iran to enrich, especially in the context of the JCPOA which did not necessitate Tehran to abandon support for terrorism or other aggressive policies, was seen as a big failure on the part of the P5+1 negotiations. <sup>(68)</sup> It also encouraged Iran to continue destabilizing the region, and negatively impacting the stability of the region. Moreover, it ignited escalation between countries as the active regional powers, such as Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, lacked confidence in US deterrence. Thus, these countries may consider developing similar nuclear capabilities <sup>(69)</sup> and enrich uranium, the outcome of which will be a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. These countries fear that a nuclear Iran will be more daring and assertive in the region, <sup>(70)</sup> and is likely to become more confrontational with the Gulf states while it seeks to secure its foreign policy goals, including the guardianship of the Shiite community across the world. <sup>(71)</sup>

The presence of an active nuclear enrichment program in Iran will increase international concerns about its goals, not only because of its history of concealing its enrichment activities, and its pursuit of denial and misinformation throughout the period of its nuclear crisis with the West, <sup>(72)</sup> but also because of further suspicions. These suspicions include Iran’s distribution of enrichment facilities across multiple sites, “its documented weaponization-related research, including experiments with high explosives, detonator development, and warhead design.” <sup>(73)</sup>

Besides, Iran’s enrichment of uranium will undermine the international system for nuclear non-proliferation and provide a green light for others who are considering the development of nuclear weapons. <sup>(74)</sup> Acceptance of Iranian



nuclear precaution, even at a low level of latency or nuclear capabilities, will lead to proliferation-control challenges and impose further pressure on the NPT if not handled carefully.<sup>(75)</sup> This could prompt some countries to change their strategy toward possessing nuclear technology, the most important of which is uranium enrichment, as this enrichment technology allows for the transfer from the enrichment path to the military one, if desired.

## **Conclusion**

Iran, as well as any country in the NPT, has the right to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes, but the lack of transparency and secrecy surrounding its enrichment activities, its expansionist policy, and 60 percent purity casts a shadow of doubt over Iranian claims about the peaceful nature of the country's nuclear program. This study examined the strategic, political and security motives behind Iran's insistence on enriching uranium locally.

Iran has been keen on owning and localizing enrichment technology as a long-term strategic goal. Enrichment has strengthened the Iranian government's political position internally through harnessing popular consensus and political and international legitimacy by removing its isolation and improving its international standing. Regarding the security dimension, uranium enrichment gives Iran a virtual deterrent and puts it in the nuclear hedging mode.

Given these motives, Iran cannot give up its uranium enrichment technology as demanded by the United States and the European Union. From an Iranian perspective, this will fundamentally harm its sovereignty and independence and diminish its status and expose it in front of the Iranian people.

Many analysts view Iran's nuclear research and development efforts as a precursor to developing a nuclear weapons program, with uranium enrichment providing a civilian cover for its ambitions. In its uranium enrichment, Iran may not aim to acquire a nuclear weapon for now, but it is clear that it is working hard to preserve its enrichment technology locally. Thus, staying at a level of nuclear latency will leave the door open for the nuclear option, and can be activated when needed. This has backfired on Iran, as uranium enrichment has led to strict international sanctions which have negatively impacted its economy and may be a justification for attacks by its opponents. In the foreseeable future, uranium enrichment may ignite an arms race in the region, a phase of instability and anxiety and undermine global efforts to limit the spread of nuclear weapons.

All of these ramifications stem from Iran's insistence on enriching uranium locally, and the suspicious activities that have accompanied it. It is difficult to ascertain Iran's intentions behind its uranium enrichment capabilities, but all possibilities remain, unless it changes its behavior and cooperates with efforts to ensure that its nuclear program is of a peaceful nature, and in the interests of regional and global stability.

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# **AZERI-TURKS OF IRAN: TRAPPED BETWEEN GEOPOLITICS AND GEOECONOMICS**

**Naveed Ahmad**

Researcher on geostrategic issues in the Middle East

## **Introduction**

**I**ran and Azerbaijan are neighbors with no territorial dispute, yet their relationship is marred by perpetual mistrust due to a clash of ethnic identities and shared religious beliefs. Iranian disquiet began to soar after the Nagorno-Karabakh war between Azerbaijan and Armenia in 2016. Viewing it as a wake-up call, Tehran responded by focusing on improving ties with Baku. What happened in 2020 was however beyond Iran's appraisal and much of the world's too. The Yerevan-occupied regions fell so spectacularly fast, leaving Iran exposed to new uncomfortable strategic realities. The Armenian buffer between the Azerbaijani people and Iranian-Azeris was suddenly no more. The last time Iran felt so uneasy about its northern border was in 1991 when Azerbaijan became an independent state, with the Aras River becoming a dividing frontier between the Azeri people. For Tehran, the primary concern is of a secessionist ethno-nationalistic movement arising among the Azeri-Turk community, its largest ethnic minority. This paper assesses the state of Iran's Azeri minority, its relationship with Tehran and Baku as well as its implications on regional and global developments. While their geostrategic alignments are diametrically opposed, Iran and Azerbaijan can still manage to find some common ground on a geo-economic plain.

## **Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism**

After Azerbaijan's triumph over Armenia in 2020, Iran's northwestern Azeri populace expressed clear happiness while being bluntly critical of Tehran's pro-Yerevan approach. The Azeri populace totals over 15 million of Iran's 80 million population, making it the Iranian government's raw nerve.<sup>(1)</sup>

This was clearly illustrated by IRGC Ground Forces Commander Brigadier General Mohammad Pakpour's comments during the Azerbaijan-Armenia war, "The first message is to our people, so that they may feel that we are vigorously monitoring the situation in the region and putting the necessary measures in line with it." He also explained, "The second message is to the countries of the region that they should respect their border integrity and should not accept a change in the geopolitics of the borders. This subject is the red line of the Islamic Republic of Iran."<sup>(2)</sup>

With the re-emergence of the state of Azerbaijan in the early 1990s, Iran first felt the tremors of Azeri ethno-nationalism in its northwestern provinces. To its good fortune, the Armenian annexation of Azerbaijan's Iran bordering districts and Nagorno-Karabakh created an effective buffer. Though the state of Azerbaijan did have a small border patch with Iran, Azeri nationalistic morale was dampened after the loss of vast swathes of land to a hostile enemy.

It was not always the case though as until the 1920s Azeri-Turks not only provided numerous dynasties to the Persian thrones (the Seljuks and the Qajars) but also remained the most loyal ethno-linguistic minority in the modern day state. King Raza Shah Pahlavi adopted a strict policy of assimilation which lasted until his ouster in 1979.<sup>(3)</sup> It was not just specific toward Azeris but also included other minorities such as Arabs, Balochis and Kurds. However, the Azeri community was suspected the most due to its agriculturally rich land, strategic location and ongoing geopolitical confrontation with the Soviet Union, which then also included today's state of Azerbaijan. For economic opportunities, better prospects for social assimilation and to avoid rampant stereotyping, Azeris migrated to major industrial cities within Iran, especially the capital Tehran. Inhabited along Iran's northwestern frontier with Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Armenia, the Azeri provinces are still among the most under-developed regions after Sistan-Balochistan in the southeast.

When the Khomeini-led opposition overthrew the Shah, the Azeri-Turks hoped the latter's oppressive policies would be reversed and their key demands about adopting and teaching the Azeri language alongside Persian would also be accepted. The commonality of the Shiite faith also bolstered their optimism. Their demands were not outlandish.

The Azeri demand for education in the Turkic language was denied then and continues to be denied now. Though allowed under the Iranian Constitution,<sup>(4)</sup> the Azeri language remains banned in educational as well as

state institutions. The community finds it imperative to teach its children the Azeri language privately. Spoken Azeri has become increasingly Persianized in terms of syntax, morphology, phonology and basic lexicon since the birth of the modern state of Iran.<sup>(5)</sup> The Azeri youth are often unable to read Azeri texts because they are written in the Persian alphabet; a derivation of the Arabic script.

Then there are more symbolic and nationalistic Azeri demands such as the restoration of Arg-e-Tabriz or Ark Castle in Tabriz after it was destroyed in the 2003 earthquake and changing street names from Turkish to Farsi.<sup>(6)</sup> The societal discrimination of Azeris is no less concerning than the denial of their right to learn, speak and write in their mother tongue.

The outrage over the drying up of Lake Urmia, the world's second largest salt lake, stems from its significance for livelihoods as well as for heritage.<sup>(7)</sup> The Azeri populace blames the Iranian government for ignoring the environmental and agricultural consequences of diverting the lake's upstream water. The lake is also an indicator of climate change affecting Iran's most fertile lands, a concern which is alleged to lie low on the government's priorities.

The Azeri-Turks spread over East and West Azerbaijan, Ardabil, Zanjan, Gilan, Khorasan and Tehran rely on satellite receivers for Turkish and Azerbaijani entertainment programs as their major source of learning the Azeri language. Access remains limited to the use of virtual private networks (VPNs) as Iran blocks the transmission of all Azeri-Turkish televised or online content. In urban centers like Tabriz, Ardabil, Urmia, Marand and Marageh the struggle for Azeri constitutional rights – the use of the Azeri mother tongue in education, the plight of Lake Urmia and an end to entrenched stereotyping against Azeris – continues in various creative ways.

Their grievances might be similar but not all Azeris agree on how to resolve them. The main dividing factor is the split between ethno-nationalistic and sectarian preferences. Due to the massive indoctrination process, which officially started in 1979, social conservatives in urban areas along with residents of rural dwellings identify themselves as Shiite Muslims first, Iranians second, and Azerbaijanis last. The differences among the Azeris deepened with the uprising in Syria in 2011, in which Iran remains heavily invested. Not only did the Khomeinist Azeris support the Iranian government's policy but they also joined the fight as mercenaries in the quest for livelihood and to perform their religious duty. The war in Syria proved to be a tool for national cohesion and the reinforcement of sectarian identity.<sup>(8)</sup> However, the Syrian war was not as effective in pumping nationalistic fervor as the war against Iraq was. Had Saddam not attacked Iran, Azeri-Turks would have risen against Iranian rule, experts believe.<sup>(9)</sup> Imam Khomeini's religious networks and the government's offices used the external invasion to keep the Azeris

tied to Tehran as their indigenous leadership and organizational structures were nascent and outreach channels were ineffective.

Though Tehran's grip on Azeri regions remained firm all the while, its surveillance apparatus became more active and widespread following Azerbaijan's conquest of Nagorno-Karabakh. A sense of fear and imprisonment has scared Azeris away from publicly expressing their jubilation over the victory and raising their perpetual woes.

Censorship notwithstanding, urban Azeris are more drawn to Turkish dramas and sources of entertainment on social media than those shown on state-controlled outlets. Drifting away from the state-promoted theocracy, the outwardly-looking Azeris find more respite and prestige in ethno-nationalism. Regarding Syria or Iraq, they tend to support Turkey's narrative and policies, while on Nagorno-Karabakh, the Azeri outrage was no secret.<sup>(10)</sup> Iran was not too swift and firm in its balancing act as its supply of oil and vital resources to Armenia during the 44-day conflict was duly noticed by secular-leaning Azeri nationalists in Iran.

Over the decades, the northwestern regions of Iran echoed with protests, from the 2006 cartoon crisis depicting Azeris as cockroaches<sup>(11)</sup> to the 2011 Urmia rallies which reiterated their quest for Azeri-Turkish identity. Tractor Sazi football fans based in Tabriz, East Azerbaijan have been the most outspoken about their admiration for Turkey and their quest to acquire their rights. From pro-Turkey slogans and waving its flag, they carry banners reflecting the plight of Lake Urmia and express their right to be educated in their mother tongue. Fans of Tabriz soccer represent the self-confident, united and visible force of the Azeri populace who are ready to challenge the government's censorship of the internet or free speech and its intimidation through law enforcement authorities. Since Tractor Sazi fans are not a tightly-knit organization, they are vulnerable to infiltration and persuasion. Their outrage is not consistent. However, the rivalry with Persian clubs goes beyond the footballfield.<sup>(12)</sup>

Iran's establishment managed these tense situations whether Azeri public outrage or protests from a law and order perspective, but the state-tolerated discrimination of Azeris manifested through hostile attitudes toward their heritage and history was not checked. The Azeris have learnt to live in Iran but with an innate fear of being portrayed as disloyal and resentful toward the Iranian state and Persian culture. The pro-Azeri protest chants during the 2017–2018 Dey were the last vocal and newsworthy expression of Azeri nationalism.<sup>(13)</sup> The jubilation visible during and after the Nagorno-Karabakh war has disappeared, possibly because of a lack of leadership and foreign support.

Iran has been building anti-Arab and anti-Turk sentiments over the last 40 years, which has somewhat favorably affected its Azeri populace. They dislike Turkey for the same reasons that it is popular among others. Turkey is prosperous, secular and modern. The Azeris see it as a staging ground for NATO operations, the secularization of Muslims and a safe haven for Israel. Turkish and Azerbaijani satellite channels, formally banned in Iran, impress the younger and urban population while bringing intangible ethno-linguistic and cultural emancipation. The Azeri citizens of Iran have been targeted for decades with Iranian nationalistic propaganda and the projection of Turkey and other Turkic people as either westernized or barbarians.

One less emphasized factor is the role of an independent but small circle of Azeri Shiite clerics who continue to resist the influence of Qom. Iran's state-appointed imams work in concert with internal security institutions, yet their efforts, which are restricted to calling for Shiite harmony and the teachings of Iman Khomeini, seem to be insufficient in the ethno-political concerned Azeri region. The Azeri-Turkish diaspora has played a significant role in the political awakening inside Iran, but it lacks external support from Turkey and Azerbaijan. Their television channels have been closed in Turkey and they are hounded by Iran's secret agents or Tehran's sympathizers.<sup>(14)</sup> The activism of the Azeri-Turkish diaspora has a marginal impact on northern Iran but can mobilize important capitals to pressurize Tehran.<sup>(15)</sup>

Preempting the perceived, prospective threats from its northwestern neighbor, Iran pursues low-key preaching activities in Azerbaijan. Baku can employ stringent measures to check such soft advances and retaliates by exposing them publicly. In October 2021, Azerbaijan closed institutions associated directly with the Supreme Leader's Office in Baku on the pretext of disregarding COVID-19 precautions and spreading the virus.<sup>(16)</sup>

Tehran sees Azerbaijan as a secularize and Russified state with deep leanings toward Turkic ethno-nationalism. Religion, particularly Shiism, in the identity of Caucasian Azerbaijan is beset with challenges such as strict governmental control, which it does not face in Iran's other neighboring countries such as Iraq and Pakistan. On the other hand, growing Azerbaijani nationalism in Iran has been marked by negative attitudes not only toward ethnic Persians but also toward other ethnic minorities, for instance, Kurds, Balochis, and Arabs. As things stand now, there are marginal prospects for Azeris forming a joint resistance platform along with other ethnicities against Iran.<sup>(17)</sup> Kurds and Turks do not get along and this fact holds ground in the case of Azeri-Turks and Kurds in Iran too. There may not be instances of frequent all-out violence but there is a cultural and political conflict. Both do not share the same sect either, Kurds are Sunni in their entirety while Azeri-Turks are predominantly Shiite. Over the decade, there have been cross-marriages in



western cities like Urmia and Mako but the prospects of a tactical alliance against the Persians or the government in Tehran are nearly non-existent.

Discontent amongst Azeri-Turks in Iran appears in three shades. The foremost is the legal positivist who believes in peaceful political struggle through electoral cycles as per the framework of Iran's Constitution and courts. The most docile and conformist political path has delivered little. Even after Baku's conquest of Nagorno-Karabakh, Tehran has not granted any concessions in respect of their decades-old demands. The only protest in 2020 in the Azeri-Turkish city of Tabriz was in solidarity with the people of Khuzestan Province who were demanding water.<sup>(18)</sup> However, Iran's Azeris became vocal about the country's hostile approach toward Azerbaijan on social media platforms like Telegram, Facebook and WhatsApp. The average Azeri living in the remote northwest is less likely to bypass Iran's highly monitored cyberspace by using a VPN. Building a pro-Azeri narrative using an anonymous account (fake name and photo) in a highly insecure setting requires much persistence, hard work and resources.

The second is the federalist discourse, which seeks the federalization of the country, seeking regional autonomy under the larger umbrella of the Iranian state. Such voices are tolerated in the political arena but with suspicion and are often publicly stigmatized.

The third and more straightforward shade is the of secession from the state and reunification with Azerbaijan. The Southern Azerbaijan National Awakening Movement (GAMOH) has spearheaded this discourse since its founding in 1995, seeking liberation from "Persian chauvinism." The discourse's emphasis is on the process of assimilation of Turks in Iran, promoting greater awareness of Azeri ethnic identity and calling for the independence of Iranian Azeri inhabited territories. GAMOH's founder Professor Mahmudali Chohraganli was jailed for two years with other comrades but was released in 1999 on health grounds. He took refuge in the United States in 2002. In April 2005, the corpses of its two members were found floating in the Aras River while in September, GAMOH was accused of killing a government official in Urmia. March 2006 was a watershed moment for GAMOH, as its members attended the Second World Azerbaijani Congress in Baku. Iran was enraged, leading it to launch a crackdown in Tabriz and ban the Navid Azerbaijan newspaper. Ever since, its significant support base in Iran's Azeri majority provinces has become more tame or muted.<sup>(19)</sup> With its own flag and parliament, secular and pro-Western GAMOH attracted too much attention from Iran's law enforcement agencies, making it impossible to operate with foreign financial and political support.<sup>(20)</sup>

## **Tensions, Cooperation and Suspicions**

In the absence of an effective and resourceful Azeri political movement in Iran, can Azerbaijan feel compelled to use military means to prop up resistance across the border? This assumption led Iran to conduct a preemptive show of force on Azerbaijan's border last year. Among Iran's irritants was also a poem recited by Turkey's President Tayyip Erdogan in December 2020, lamenting how the Aras River separates Azeri-speaking people in Azerbaijan and Iran. This poem symbolized the pan-Turkism doctrine of unification of all Turks.

An excerpt of the poem reads, "They separated the Aras River and filled it with rocks and rods. I will not be separated from you. They have separated us forcibly."<sup>(21)</sup> Almost 200 years ago, the Russo-Persian War brought humiliation to Iran during the era of the Qajar dynasty which lasted until 1925. As per the Treaty of Turkmenchay, Iran lost large swathes of land in the South Caucasus to Russia and the Aras River became the boundary line between Iran and the Soviet Union, which still exists. Tehran is nervous at the prospects of the narrative of Shiite harmony losing to ethno-nationalism, triggering an uprising and eventual war with Azeris aided by Turkey and Israel among others.

The former Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif responded to the poem recital by tweeting that President Erdogan "was not informed that what he ill-recited in Baku refers to the forcible separation of areas north of Aras from Iranian motherland. Didn't he realize that he was undermining the sovereignty of the Republic of Azerbaijan? No one can talk about our beloved Azerbaijan." Ankara summoned Tehran's envoy to express displeasure.<sup>(22)</sup>

The 44-day war over Nagorno-Karabakh seems to have left Iran nearly as bruised as Armenia.<sup>(23)</sup> To deter Azerbaijan's confidence and alarmed by some events and statements emanating from the neighboring country, the IRGC launched Fatehan Kheybar, its biggest military drill along its northern border on October 1, 2021, involving thousands of troops, squadrons of tanks and armed vehicles, formations of artillery and dozens of gunship and utility helicopters. Besides the deployment of its variety of air defense systems and an assortment of drones, Iran's fighter jets flew sorties with aggressive and interception payloads. It was anything but a military training exercise in light of the statements issued by Iranian military commanders.

"The IRGC will attack Azerbaijan with 4,000 missiles, which will completely destroy Baku," Mohammad Bagheri, an IRGC military commander serving as Iran's chief of staff, was quoted as saying by Iranian national media. Turkey and Azerbaijan jointly responded to Iran with another extensive military drill in the liberated region along the Iranian border.

Iran's threats prompted the armies of Azerbaijan and Turkey to carry out an exercise dubbed the "Indestructible Brotherhood 2021" in the Nakhichevan

region. Motorized infantry, special forces, air defense and air-borne assets participated in the Azeri exclave sandwiched between Armenia and Iran.<sup>(24)</sup> It provoked the IRGC regional commander in Tabriz, Colonel Hossein Pursmail, to bring Israel into the mix, which was not even part of the military buildup. He remarked, "The repetition of Israel's threats against Iran through the mouth of the Republic of Azerbaijan is not only not in the interests of Baku but is also a threat to its very existence." No doubt, Israel's drones and other weapons systems were instrumental behind the Azeri victory against Armenia but so far, there has been no alleged or reported Israeli attack on Iran. Pursmail's statement encapsulated the Iranian perception of Azerbaijan's gains against Armenia. The actual trigger for the massive exercise was the trilateral exercise dubbed the "Three Brothers" involving Pakistani and Turkish special forces alongside Azerbaijani ones. The units "successfully accomplished the tasks of infiltration behind imaginary enemy lines by land, sea, air, as well as an ambush, attack, amphibious, and airborne training."<sup>(25)</sup> The trilateral military training perturbed Iran and it lodged its concerns with Pakistan and Turkey, which were dispelled immediately. Earlier, Azerbaijan and Turkey had held a largescale winter military drill in early February 2021. Azerbaijan's decision to detain Iranian truckers crossing into its territory in transit to Armenia via the Goris-Kapan Road exposed Tehran's disregard for changed realities. Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev publicly expressed the country's concern over the violation of its sovereignty.<sup>(26)</sup> Intensive diplomacy led to the defusion of tensions, but it only seemed temporary. Iran's discomfort with Azerbaijan's signing of defense pacts with Turkey on top of deep strategic and economic ties with Israel and more recent joint military training with Pakistan exposes the limits of its soft and hard power alike.

Tehran has long felt threatened by deep military ties between Baku and Tel Aviv. From Iran's perspective, Azerbaijan can be more than a listening post for its foes as it is a suitable location to launch preemptive attacks against its vital installations, nuclear and missile facilities, in particular. Tensions are particularly high across the Gulf after Tel Aviv established diplomatic relations with Abu Dhabi and Manama. The prospect of an Israeli attack has increased further after the fall of occupied Azeri territories from Armenian control. Over the past decade, Israel and Azerbaijan have become strategic partners with Tel Aviv's imports soaring to over \$4 billion and Azeri gas catering for 40 percent of Israeli energy needs.<sup>(27)</sup>

Azerbaijan's modern military equipment largely comes from Israel, thanks to a \$1.6 billion deal signed in 2012 and a \$5 billion defense contract in 2016. Azerbaijan has achieved impressive results through the use of Israel-made loitering munitions such as Harpy, Harop and Orbiter 1 K besides Turkish drones.<sup>(28)</sup>

Iran fears that Turkey and Israel can push Azerbaijan to instigate a more robust secessionist movement. Such a movement can cause Azeri desertions in Iranian security organizations and the armed forces, potentially transforming the movement into a militant outfit. So, Tehran has pursued a multitrack approach to address the newfound headache on its northwestern border, which had been dormant due to cordial ties with Armenia. While Tehran is improving its military infrastructure in the northwestern region, it is developing combat capabilities suitable for the landscape and countering Azeri armed forces, which put on an impressive show but against a smaller and less capable enemy in 2020. As things stand, Iran's military muscle is on par with Azerbaijan's while it maintains numerical superiority. Tehran has been deepening its ties with Ankara and Baku while its key ally Moscow remains bogged down in the Ukraine war. To deter Israel, Iran is not only polishing its existing capabilities but is engaged in sabre rattling as well. The most notable was the attack on an Israeli-aligned organization in Erbil in March. Though it was not a legitimate military target, Iran did not hide behind the notion of plausible deniability but admitted firing missiles from its soil.

In line with its doctrine of forward defense, the IRGC was quick to launch an Azeri Shiite outfit, Huseynyun, with its own flag and emblem, unveiled right after Armenia's loss of Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan. Huseynyun is thought to have been raised along the lines of Hashdal-Shahbi or Fatemiyoun.<sup>(29)</sup> The insurgent group has not been heard of except on Iran-affiliated online communication channels or its propagation via social media. Neither have any subversive activities been reported in Azerbaijan nor have authorities revealed that any individual affiliated with Huseynyun had been arrested.

The real question, however, is about the prospect of a political resistance movement becoming strong enough to openly challenge Iran's rule in its northwestern Azeri province. The grievances of the Azeri people are deep but they do not seem compelled yet to take matters to the next level. The conquest of Nagorno-Karabakh by Azerbaijan was sudden for the Azeris living across the river too. There have been no signs of foreign interference in Iran's Azeri populace. Ankara and Baku are treading a fine line in keeping Iran's Azeri question alive but falling short of confronting it in one way or the other.

For Azerbaijan itself, the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh is far from settled. A sizeable chunk of land is still under Armenian control while Russian peacekeepers will remain stationed for another three years (2025) as per the agreement. If the status quo prevails (border demarcation), Yerevan would like it to be extended until November 2030. Currently, some 2,000 Russian troops are stationed at 27 outposts scattered throughout Nagorno-Karabakh and the Lachin corridor linking Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh.

## **Interdependence and Geoeconomics**

The ceasefire deal caters for “all economic and transport links” between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the setting up of an “unobstructed” transport corridor between Azerbaijan and Nakhichevan. Such a corridor will be consequential for Iran as Azerbaijan will not need its land route to connect to its exclave which borders Turkey. Azerbaijan will provide a five-kilometer corridor in Lachin to Armenia. In case Armenia reopens rail links, Azerbaijan will have to reciprocate its linkage to Iran through Nakhichevan. Iran’s rail link with Armenia will also connect her to Russia, for which it relies on Armenian roads besides maritime trade with Russia through the Caspian Sea.

In January, Armenia’s Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan ordered the early reconstruction of the Armenian railway through Meghri and Yeraskh, set for completion within three years at a cost of \$200 million.<sup>(30)</sup> Azerbaijan is already upgrading its side of the railway system. Russia is keen not only to keep Azerbaijan in its economic and strategic sphere but also to build long-term linkages for the future.

Iran will become a beneficiary of Russia’s success in developing interdependencies between Armenia and Azerbaijan, eventually extending to its production houses and dry ports via road and rail links. In 2021, Tehran received a rude awakening when Azerbaijan asserted itself in 2021 by halting the unauthorized entry of Iranian trucks through its newly liberated territories in route to Armenia. The arrest of truck drivers caused a major diplomatic crisis between the neighbors escalated tensions between the two countries.<sup>(31)</sup> Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Armenia and Iran remained key trading partners. Throughout the war and until now, Iran was a vital source of hydrocarbons, minerals, metals, fertilizers, agricultural products, fertilizers, and glassware. Yerevan exports electricity, machinery and chemicals to Tehran. Armenia is hurrying to build alternate roads to keep trade ongoing via its shrunken 44-kilometer border with Iran. The southern region of Syunik or Zangezur, as Azerbaijan likes to call it, is a strategically important region as it separates the Azeri mainland from the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic. Prior to the tripartite agreement, Azerbaijan was dependent on Iran for logistical and aerial connections to its 5,500 square-mile exclave. As per the new deal, Armenia will provide a land connection – the Zangezur corridor – to Azerbaijan to Nakhichevan while Baku will oblige Yerevan with a similar one called the Lachin corridor linking Armenia and the region of Nagorno-Karabakh. Both the corridors are yet to be operational and modalities like customs facilities to control cargos and people need to be hammered out.

“At this stage, we have achieved an agreement on building the rail connection from Azerbaijan through Armenia to the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic and also an agreement on the construction of the highway, but the exact route

of the highway has not yet been identified," President Aliyev told a press conference.<sup>(32)</sup> Tensions exist and the progress remains slow, largely due to domestic politics in Armenia.

To avert any internal ethnic movement in the future, Iran has taken the route of interdependence which suits Azerbaijan too, at least for the time being. On March 11, Azerbaijan and Iran signed an agreement to establish new transport and electricity supply links connecting mainland Azerbaijan to its exclave of Nakhichevan via Iranian territory.<sup>(33)</sup> The neighbors agreed to build new railway lines, highways, communication, and energy supply lines to connect Azerbaijan's East Zangazur and the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic through Iran. Tehran will build four bridges on the Aras River, two each for motorways and railway tracks just 5 kilometers away from the Armenian border.

Due to the delay on Yerevan's part in providing a Nakhichevan land link to Baku, the Iranian proposal is irresistible. Iran is not only trying to build trust with Azerbaijan but also seeking similar concessions for its goods to Europe through the South Caucasus.

The thaw that began in early 2022 with the agreement on joint infrastructure projects for transit trade led to an MoU for the construction of a road bridge over the Astarachay River at the border of the two countries.

On December 23, Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian paid a follow-up visit to Baku to offer Tehran's role in the reconstruction of Nagorno-Karabakh and the strategic cities of Zangilan and Jebail.<sup>(34)</sup> Iran is invoking a bilateral cooperation agreement signed during President Ilham Aliyev's Iran visit in February 2016 whereby it seeks to continue the construction of hydropower facilities and hydropower plants Khudaferin and Giz Galaxy on the Aras river. Iran had won the contracts from Armenia but promised Azerbaijan to respect its claim over the territory.

On its part, Iran seeks Azerbaijan's cooperation to realize the North-South Transport Corridor for connectivity to Europe while Baku is invested deeply in becoming a reliable energy source for the European countries. Tehran's strategic alignment rests on Russia and China while Baku presses for closer collaboration with NATO, Turkey and Israel. Azerbaijan started its peacekeeping duties under NATO in Afghanistan in 2002 which ended in August 2021. On the eve of the Economic Cooperation Organization summit in Ashgabat, Iran signed a gas transit deal with Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan. The prospects for the realization of such a complex arrangement are grim as the two Caspian states will likely prefer laying a pipeline instead of opting to depend on Iran.

## Conclusion

If the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace deal passes the crucial test of the smooth functioning of respective passageways in the months ahead, Azerbaijan's interdependence on Iran will reduce significantly. Yet Baku will prefer to keep backup logistical corridors via Iranian territory. The level of mutual trust between Armenia and Azerbaijan is understandably low, which serves Iran splendidly.

Increased cooperation with Azerbaijan while building military infrastructure for any eventuality is the right approach from Iran's perspective in managing a potential internal upheaval among its Azeri populace. However, Tehran's strongarm tactics in addressing political and identity concerns will not be addressed by building bridges and interdependence with the South Caucasus. Acknowledging the Azeri populace's right to learn, speak and write in their mother tongue as per the Iranian Constitution can boost pro-Iran sentiments in its northwestern regions, especially when ties with Azerbaijan are improving.

As for racial discrimination and the use of slurs like "Turkish donkey" for referring to Azeris, Iran faces a two-pronged challenge: First, its unserious attitude to deal with racial complaints through law-enforcement services, second, its lack of a clear vision to tackle the deeply rooted racism in dramas, humor and political discourse. It is the most precarious crack in Iran's relationship with minorities, including the Azeri.

The raising of militant outfits like Husyenyun is bound to be counterproductive; however, it is expected that Iran will refrain from supporting them. Azerbaijan can conveniently launch a tit-for-tat move. If Iran's strategy of appeasing Azerbaijan is based on trade and commerce, then respect for mutual sovereignty and non-interference should supposedly be observed.

Given the complexities of Iran's stratagem, it is safe to assume that all options remain on the table. Iran seems to be playing the economic card to tame Azerbaijan after its victory in the 44-day war. Tehran's insecurity with Baku will remain a constant given the latter's relations with Tel Aviv going from strength to strength across multiple domains. The trilateral coalition between Azerbaijan, Turkey and Israel is a source of anxiety which Iran has to learn to live with. Baku-Tel Aviv ties became stronger while Turkey and Israel were at odds with each other after the MV Mavi Marmara incident. Without a doubt, Tehran recognizes the fact that Tel Aviv-Baku relations are of a strategic, technological and economic nature. This explains Iran's attempt to revive Azerbaijan's trust and establish relations based on bilateral mutual interest and economic interdependence. Unlike Iran, Azerbaijan will continue to look toward NATO and Europe.

Despite of Iran's fear of foreign roles in inciting Azeris' discontent, there are hardly any significant signs of activism among the Azeri-Turkish populace in Tehran or in the northwestern regions. Given the fissures in the Iranian approach to its northwest regions, Tehran's rivals might be granted with an opportunity to use the Azeri minority as a bargaining chip.



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# IRAN'S ENVIRONMENTAL POLICYMAKING: ACTORS AND CHALLENGES

Mohamed Abdulhadi Shantir

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Researcher on political science and  
specialist in non-centralism and local affairs

After over four decades of clerical rule in Iran, the country is now facing grave environmental problems. Iran was once home to rare marshes, wetlands, and dense forests. Decades of neglect have led to the devastation of Iran's environment. Iran's land, water and climate continue to remain vulnerable to environmental degradation. Unfortunately, Iran's acute environmental crisis only continues to worsen.<sup>(1)</sup>

Iran has legislation, regulations and decrees to protect the environment as well as environmental institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Iran has also declared its desire to partake in international cooperation to mitigate its environmental problems. However, Iran's short and medium-term political and economic policies are given more priority than those related to sustainable development and countering environmental threats. The recognition of the importance of the ecosystem started very late under Iran's highly centralized political system led mainly by the supreme leader who dominates Iran's decision-making and ruling institutions — this is in addition to many unofficial institutions that have played a pivotal role in bolstering the leadership's policies and ensuring the continuity of the current political system.

The study addresses the following major question: Why has Iran's environmental policy been ineffective? There are also sub-questions including: What are the main environmental issues and risks facing Iran? Why does the Iranian government not accord the same priority to environmental threats as it does to economic issues? How is Iran's environmental policy crafted? Why has the role of organizations to protect the environment declined? Do NGOs and movements have a role in protecting the environment? Does Iran allow civil society to play an active role in safeguarding the environment?

The study also sheds light on the policymaking process and the relationships between various environmental actors. Finally, it highlights the gap in government priorities, with it prioritizing economic development over environmental protection. The government does not pay great attention to environmental protection and haphazard environmental policymaking has led to further complexity and harm.

The study analyzes Iran's general environmental policies, adopting the method of "system analysis" to review environmental policymaking, particularly the inputs needed to craft the aforesaid policies. These policies largely determine environmental policy outcomes as does the relationship between the Iranian state and NGOs. To interpret policy issues, the "rational choice theory" \* is applied and its sub-theory, the "median voter theorem." This theory suggests that if a country effectively implements and adheres to democratic principles and values, people can mobilize to demand their rights. In light of popular mobilization, democratic governments are expected to respond in order to satisfy public demands. However, as Iran's government disregards the Iranian people's democratic rights, withholds information regarding institutional performance, and protects the interests of a narrow elite that continues to hold onto power, the country's environmental policy remains floundering on the margins. <sup>(2)</sup>

### **Public Policy Problems: Alternative Solutions and Government Actions**

Public policy reflects the extent to which governments respond to public pressure and the prevailing conditions in society. The alternatives to public policy are often reflective of the preferences and options of those in power rather than public demands. The latter is consistent with the view of Emeritus Professor of Political Science at Florida State University and former McKenzie Professor of Government Thomas R. Dye who said that public policy is whatever the government chooses to do or not to do.<sup>(3)</sup>

Public policies are crafted for the sake of satisfying public needs or providing a societal benefit. Policies address outstanding problems and are also designed to prevent potential problems in the future.<sup>(4)</sup> A policy problem is included in a government's agenda which is steered by policymakers and cov-

ers the issues and public demands that necessitate a government review and response through introducing the necessary measures. However, the steps to craft public policy are not the same for all governments. Every government has its own respective priorities and considers a diverse range of variables. In addition, each government has its own way to achieve specific goals and face different challenges. Thus, the method of crafting public policy is flexible and changeable. In other words, it varies according to a government's position on national policy issues.<sup>(5)</sup> A government may opt to tackle a problem at its roots but if it fails to implement an appropriate policy response, it will worsen and evolve into different forms and generate further problems, or a government may work to lessen a problem's impact as much as possible. However, a government may overlook problems due to technical and financial constraints or for political and foreign policy reasons.<sup>(6)</sup>

All of the aforementioned indicates that identifying solutions to problems is the core purpose of public policy. Public policies are crafted through the interactions between official and unofficial actors that make up the political system and institutions that execute them. These interactions reflect the extent of a political system's actual performance and its position on public policy issues as well as highlighting the differences between official and unofficial actors in a political system.

### **Iran's Environmental Problems**

Iran suffers from water supply shortages, depletion of ground water resources, desertification, vehicle exhaust pollution, land erosion, oil pollution in the Arabian Gulf, and drought. These problems were caused by the first Gulf War, sanctions, climate change, inefficient water use, the misallocation of natural resources, vehicle emissions, outdated oil refinery processes, industrial/solid waste, urbanization policies, desert expansion, deforestation, overgrazing, weak oversight, and lack of enforcement of environmental legislation and regulations.

#### **Water Problems**

Water is a vital natural resource. At present, Iran's water policies are inadequate, and they are crafted in light of the following realities/factors:

■ Sanitation problems: About 60 percent of the sewage from northern Iran is dumped into the Caspian Sea which causes water pollution.<sup>(7)</sup>

■ Food self-sufficiency policies have forced Iranian farmers to use larger amounts of ground water for irrigation. As a result, wells are continuously depleted and agricultural lands are dwindling and increasingly salinized. Extensive dam construction and rapid agricultural expansion have caused problems in Iran's lakes such as the Urmia Lake crisis.<sup>(8)</sup>

■ The complex problems in the Arab-majority Ahwaz Province have been caused by shortages in water supplies that have negatively impacted agricultural practices. This is due to the diversion of water resources from Ahwaz to the central desert areas. This is part of Iran's policy to reshape the ethnic makeup of this province to forcibly displace the Arab community. This has been deliberately done by causing water poverty, destroying the agricultural heartland of Ahwaz and confiscating thousands of hectares of land around the Karun River.<sup>(9)</sup> As a result, Ahwaz's farmers staged protests in 2018 because of water scarcity and severe drought.

Based on the aforementioned, it becomes clear that water and agricultural problems have arisen because of the government's policies, particularly those regarding dam construction, the diversion of water resources to desert areas, and land confiscation for national agricultural projects. Furthermore, Iran's flawed water allocation policies have also heightened the country's regional inequalities. As a result, Iran ranked 131 globally in terms of water resource management.<sup>(10)</sup>

These examples clearly indicate that Iran's water crisis is a real challenge for drinking water supplies, livestock, and fisheries. This water crisis is a direct threat to human security and quality of life. At the same time, Iran's water crisis is a new source of potential political conflict.

### **Industrial Pollution**

Since the late 1970s, Tehran has ranked among the most polluted capital cities in the world, pressuring the government to act. The Iranian government has gradually adopted limited measures to tackle pollution. Examples of causes of Iran's industrial pollution are as follows:

■ Suspended particles: The Iran-Iraq War leveled the land and turned it into dust and dry tidal flats, increasing dust storms that cause pollution. Dust storms across Iran's provinces have led to high levels of particle matter in the air as witnessed in 2018 when "the intense suspended atoms spread across more than 20 provinces in Iran." The suspended particles reached Tehran covering more than 1 million square kilometers and affecting a population of 20 million. The crisis of the suspended particles in the provinces of Khuzestan and Sistan and Balochistan led to a political crisis.<sup>(11)</sup>

■ Large-scale industrial and urban development and the extensive use of water has produced different pollutants in Isfahan city.<sup>(12)</sup> Ahwaz is also the most contaminated city in the world due to waste coming from oil and petrochemicals.

■ The contamination caused by the discharge of pharmaceutical waste into the marine environment of the Arabian Gulf. Active compounds present in pharmaceutical waste, especially erythromycin residues, have serious health

risks for humans and all living organisms. The urban wastewater from the water treatment plants Jarsozan and Soro in Bandar Abbas is a major source of effluent in the marine environment of the Arabian Gulf at a rate of 500 liters to 700 liters per second. These pollutants threaten the future of the marine ecosystem.<sup>(13)</sup>

Accordingly, contamination is almost an accepted part of daily life in Iran's provinces. Iranian decision-makers are expected to develop more effective and coherent policies to confront the country's mounting pollution problems.

### **The Threat to Biodiversity and Ecosystems**

Iran's ecosystem has a rich and extensive biodiversity. However, forests, pastures, wildlife, and marine resources are destroyed because of deforestation, overgrazing, the cutting of vegetation, and the random plowing of grasslands for dry farming on unsuitable land. Forest areas have decreased, and some marshes have been blighted by drought such as the Hamoun and Anzali marshes.<sup>(14)</sup> These destructive practices do not only impact human security but also threaten wildlife and various species of animals in Iran.

These damaging practices as well as Iranian environmental policies have been based on estimations that do not take into consideration the preservation of the country's biological diversity and rich natural resources. Iranian policymakers have also disregarded the massive economic and aesthetic value of Iran's ecosystems. Consequently, Iranian policymakers have irreversibly harmed water catchments, eroded lands and marshes, and destroyed forests.

### **Internal Displacement**

The environmentally induced displacement from 2006 to 2011 reduced the proportion of villagers from 32 percent to 29 percent and increased the proportion of Iran's urban population from 68 percent to 71 percent.<sup>(15)</sup>

Rates of internal displacement indicate the extent of the country's environmental degradation. It should be noted that some causes of environmental displacement are related to deliberate government interventions in order to change the ethnic composition of some regions, such as the case of Ahwaz.

The aforementioned problems reflect the environmental inequality in Iran. A 2020 United Nations Environment Program report ranked Iran 117 out of 133 countries in regard to environmental indicators. According to the World Bank, Iran's environmental problems have reduced the country's GDP by approximately 5 percent to 10 percent. Most of Iran's environmental problems are the result of the practices of the Iranian government. Throughout the decades of totalitarian rule, the government's policies never extended beyond revolutionary principles to ensuring the welfare of the people and the environment.

## **The Impact of Economic Policies on Environmental Quality**

The Iranian government has always included environmental protection measures within the context of national development programs, energy plans, and economic reform policies. The most recent plan conducted by the Iranian government was the Sixth Development Plan for five years, from 2016/2017 to 2102/2022. However, in Iran's case, environmental plans rarely translate into realistic and serious policies. In the best-case scenario, the adoption of legislation and regulations or programs and policies are not often executed. However, when deemed to be in the interests of the government to sustain the political system, policies are enacted to the extent of undermining other public interests.

Economic policies are given much more importance than those related to environmental protection. In practice, the government focuses only on the resistance economy and policies which are reflective of the ideas and character of Iran's political system. The Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei may have underestimated the impact of international sanctions on Iran and does not accept the country's continued dependence on the import of strategic goods. His "sermons" mainly focus on an independent, rich and capable Iranian nation, especially in the agricultural and pastoral domains and the compulsory conformity between government plans, budgets and all programs of the resistance economy, even if the natural environment is destroyed.<sup>(16)</sup> Therefore, Iran's economic policies have played a key role in destroying the environment as reflected in the recent water scarcity crisis, which has not only caused internal tensions but has also led to tensions with Iraq and Afghanistan over shared water resources.

The resistance economy basically aims to prevent foreign domination over the Iranian economy. It is composed of three sectors: the state, cooperative and private sectors. The state sector includes all large-scale industries, major mineral mines, power generation infrastructure, dams, and large-scale irrigation networks. All these are publicly owned and administered by the state.<sup>(17)</sup> The state presence is noticeable in the industrial and financial services sectors as well. There are many companies connected to military and security institutions. Iran depends on oil and gas exports and also relies on the agriculture and service sectors.<sup>(18)</sup> Although Iran's economy is relatively diversified compared to its counterparts, the economy still largely depends on oil revenues.<sup>(19)</sup> Therefore, Iran's sustainable development goals and its green transformation project will not be achieved in the near to medium term.

According to the World Bank, Iran's economy has been affected by the coronavirus pandemic and international and regional developments. Despite the possibility of sanctions relief, Iran is facing mounting challenges in the con-



text of climate change which is exerting further pressure on society, particularly on the poor segments.<sup>(20)</sup>

The environment suffers as a result of the structure and nature of the Iranian economy itself. The economy depends mainly on fossil fuels, which increases the level of air pollution in the long run. Since this economic pattern is environmentally destructive, any growth in the energy sector will inevitably increase the threat to the environment. Urban public transport systems, rural and urban manufacturing and services dependent on unclean sources of energy can also lead to irreparable environmental damage.<sup>(21)</sup>

Environmentally unfriendly concepts and practices dominate the Iranian economy. This exacerbates the country's environmental woes. Environmental problems impact not only economic security but also human security.

### **Iran's Environmental Policies—Contradictions and Selectivity**

The Iranian government has passed legislation, regulations and decrees in order to protect Iran's environment. However, long-term environmental threats such as pollution and water scarcity have increased. These problems have negatively impacted sustainability, wellbeing and the overall quality of life in Iran.<sup>(22)</sup> Therefore, Iranian policymakers face the challenge of crafting and implementing policies that are environmentally friendly and ensure sustainable development.<sup>(23)</sup>

The following two aspects highlight the key factors/determinants of environmental policymaking and government performance in Iran. The first aspect relates to some dimensions of the framework regulating environmental policymaking and the second aspect relates to the factors needed to develop effective policies in Iran.

### **The Regulatory Framework Governing Environmental Policies**

The following are the main legislative, institutional and political dimensions that dictate the framing of environmental policies in Iran:

■ The Iranian Constitution considers it important to protect the environment. Preserving environmental integrity is the duty of the state. Economic activities that inevitably involve pollution and despoliation of the environment or cause irreparable damage are therefore forbidden.<sup>(24)</sup> In a similar context, the Constitution mentions that natural ecosystems such as water resources, natural forests, marshland and unenclosed pastureland are public property, and the government may utilize these areas in accordance with detailed procedures regulating their use.<sup>(25)</sup> It is noted that Iran included in the 1979 Constitution, (revised in 1989), the principle of environmental protection in Chapter Four which is mainly related to economic and financial affairs. In this part of the Constitution, Iran's environment and natural resources are linked to the objectives of the resistance economy; the economic independence of the Irani-

an state and society; and the increase in agricultural, livestock and industrial production to satisfy the country's needs and to reach a level of self-sufficiency.<sup>(26)</sup> At the decentralized level, the Constitution calls for non-discrimination among the various provinces and regions when it comes to the exploitation of natural resources, and the distribution of economic activities.<sup>(27)</sup>

■ Iran has an environmental protection law which was enacted in 1974 and includes 21 articles. These specify the rules and measures for the preservation and the improvement of the environment.<sup>(28)</sup> However, the law is not sufficient to prevent the deterioration of the environment. To save the environment, civil society and institutions must be involved to protect it. It is important to make oversight more robust to ensure that the policies and practices causing environmental harm are not replicated in the future.<sup>(29)</sup>

■ In 2021, several environmental documents and programs were announced. Among the most important was the national document for preserving water, which was drafted by the vice president for science and technology. It outlines strategies to address drought and soil erosion and the preservation of water resources.<sup>(30)</sup> The national document on promoting environmental protection was jointly drafted by the Department of Environment and Culture and the Islamic Guidance Ministry. This document defines the strategies and comprehensive mechanisms to increase cross-sectoral and inter-institutional partnerships, and foster a culture of environmental protection, education, social responsibility and environmental literacy.<sup>(31)</sup>

■ Iran announced its support for international efforts to reduce gas emissions based on “common but differentiated responsibilities.” Iran signed the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 1992 and ratified the convention in 1996 and the Kyoto Protocol in 2005 but did not accept the Doha Amendment to the Kyoto Protocol. It signed the Paris Agreement on climate change in 2015 without ratifying it. It should be noted that the Iranian government implements environmental projects funded by international organizations like the World Bank.<sup>(32)</sup>

Environmental issues were a primary focus of presidential campaigns and programs in 2021. As Iran's environmental problems increase in magnitude, tensions and protests worsen. This was witnessed just before the elections in 2021 when the environmentally harmful policies of some presidential candidates were exposed. Ebrahim Raisi's presidential campaign promised the drafting of a comprehensive environmental document to prioritize sustainable development, water management, natural resource management and waste management, as well as public environmental education, watershed management, the development of aquifer recharge plans, underground dams, rehabilitation and construction of wetlands and lakes, and many other environmentally friendly policies. With this comprehensive vision, Iran is expect-

ed to make a shift toward environmental conservation as a high priority during President Raisi's administration. However, the Raisi government has not yet announced any specific environmental program. The Raisi government is willing to comply with, but is not yet ready to consider the ratification of the Paris Agreement and link it to the outcome of the nuclear deal.<sup>(33)</sup> It should be noted that former President Hassan Rouhani, before the last presidential elections were held, made the protection of the environment a top priority for his government. The Rouhani government adopted policies to reduce air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions by improving gasoline quality.<sup>(34)</sup>

A review of Iran's regulatory framework governing environmental policies shows that priority is accorded to advancing the political system's ideology at the expense of realistic policy solutions. This has had a substantial impact on any adopted policies or actions to conform with international benchmarks and to mitigate the threats of environmental deterioration.

### **Requirements for the Development of Environmental Policies**

After reviewing the most important dimensions governing Iran's environmental policymaking, the requirements for reforming and developing Iran's environmental policy are discussed as follows:

■ The Constitution has recognized the importance of preserving the environment as mentioned (Article 50). However, there is no political will to address Iran's environmental problems. Iran still faces several challenges to re-greening the environment. Cooperation with international environmental organizations and international and regional forces is essential. New policies to rectify previous mistakes must be implemented. The government must work harder to enforce laws and policies to protect the environment.<sup>(35)</sup>

■ The government must act urgently and provide aid and support to the most affected regions and governorates, reduce public anger and prevent the return of protests.<sup>(36)</sup>

■ Environmental taxes should be applied, especially carbon and power taxes on industries which heavily use fossil fuels. The main objective of policymakers is to reduce energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions, comply with international commitments and equitably redistribute revenues. This can be achieved by imposing a tax on energy consumers.<sup>(37)</sup>

■ Economic reforms should mainly focus on growth in the least polluted economic sectors and consider sustainable development projects such as the hydropower projects which Iran gave priority to in the first and second five-year national development plans. However, the country still faces sanctions restrictions. Alternatives need to be considered to diversify the country's energy resources.<sup>(38)</sup> Over the long term, the positive impact on the environment will be evident.

■ In the medium term, possible solutions can be found through devolving power to governorates and local councils. These local bodies should implement development plans to encourage villagers to remain in the rural areas in order to reduce urbanization or migration to the cities. This necessitates the strengthening of Iran's decentralized system by giving local authorities opportunities and enabling them to exercise their powers in land management and local development, thus contributing to bringing governance closer to the people, and enhancing the involvement of local people and resolving regional ethnic differences. The possible administrative reorganization into suitable governorates will overcome the country's geographical, environmental, and economic inequalities. These problems are considered to be at the core of Iran's public administration reform policies. The troubling fact in Iran is that the government has become even more unaccountable and ineffective.<sup>(39)</sup>

Accordingly, recognized as a constitutional right, the protection of the environment is the duty of the Iranian government. Iran's environment suffers from serious problems. Therefore, interventions and effective policies are needed as well as the readiness of authorities to enforce environmental protection policies. Iranian environmental policies seem contradictory and are disregarded or selectively applied. This has resulted in drawbacks, thus undermining these policies and increasing environmental threats. As the calls for economic reform to achieve sustainable development and curb environmental problems increase, achieving good economic growth while protecting the environment at the same time in Iran is still possible.

### **The Influence of Iran's Political System on the DoE's Performance**

The Department of Environment (DoE) is a government organization assigned to the president. It was founded in 1972 and commenced operations in the same year by hosting the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance. It is concerned with all aspects of environmental protection such as the management of natural parks, land and marine reserves, natural resources conservation, and pollution control in Iran.<sup>(40)</sup> It should be noted that there are other environmental government agencies, including the Management of The Rangelands and Watershed.

The DoE is considered the "environmental arm of the Iranian government," especially in the face of external threats. It transmits "hostile and critical rhetoric" rather than executing its main tasks as a governmental organization: resolving environmental issues and monitoring the implementation of environmental protection laws.<sup>(41)</sup> The DoE is beset with the following problems and challenges:

- The department's structure is incompatible with its mandated tasks.
- Administrative appointments are politicized. The department's heads are not chosen based on competence but based on nepotism. Some of them do not have the necessary qualifications to lead the department.

- Since the DoE is a government organization, it adheres to the orientations of the political system, which is already destroying the environment.
- Its objectives are not clearly defined.
- The DoE lacks a long-term strategy.
- The DoE's plans and programs depend entirely on the arbitrary environmental perspectives of government officials and the priorities of external bodies — with the approval of the Iranian political system.
- The programs and institutions that monitor the DoE's performance lack effectiveness.<sup>(42)</sup>

Thus, the DoE's performance depends on several factors related to the political system's position on environmental issues, the orientations and policies of Iranian governments and institutions on environmental development, the presence of qualified staff (experts) to manage Iran's environmental issues, and the extent of the government's openness to environmental civil society actors.<sup>(43)</sup>

The foregoing indicates that Iran's weak environmental policies are largely due to the DoE's structure and its poor performance when it comes to decision-making and management within a highly centralized system.

### **NGOs and the Limits of Their Effectiveness in Iran**

The significance and role of NGOs emerged after the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit in 1992. Since then, environmental organizations, whether international or local, have played an essential role in shaping environmental policies across the world.

For example, environmental NGOs (ENGOS) in Iran have carried out environmental awareness campaigns to protect Isfahan and collected and audited data about the damage to the Zayanderud River. In addition, they proposed solutions, carried out disinfection work, mobilized local communities to protect the river, protested against environmental threats, and participated in planning and decision-making with local councils.<sup>(44)</sup> This is the best practice for ENGOS, which is not possible for all organizations in Iran.

The nature of the relationship between the Iranian government and ENGOS can be divided into four aspects: collaborative, complementary, confrontational, and cooperation-confrontation. The relationship between the Iranian government and ENGOS could be cooperative and confrontational at the same time. There could be cooperative cases but the relationship between both parties could also be confrontational.<sup>(45)</sup> The nature of this relationship and interactions in Iran are based on the following:

- ENGOS have the constitutional right to file complaints about environmental crimes and violations. In addition, the regulations of ENGOS' activities approved by the government on May 28, 2005 allow such organizations to file

complaints that concern the public interest. The Agenda 21 document is one of the most important environmental documents regarding the main role of ENGOs. Although several rules recognize the role of environmentalists in civil society, the actions of the Iranian government hinder the establishment of a successful partnership between the government and ENGOs to achieve sustainable development. Iran's policymakers do not cooperate with ENGOs. The executive directors of the EPO in Iran are controlled by the ruling elite which adversely impacts the participation of ENGOs. There is hardly any communication, consultation and dialogue between Iranian ENGOs and government agencies on various environmental issues.

■ ENGOs in Iran were primarily established after the Rio Conference in 1992. They are non-profit, independent organizations. The number of civil society organizations working on mining, land and environmental issues that participated in the National Conference of Environmental NGOs held in Shiraz was estimated to be more than 500 in 2003. However, after more than three decades of the proliferation of ENGOs in Iran, a strong green movement has not yet been established. Public discontent over the environmental crisis prevails instead. These organizations have not been able to form active civic associations and communities. In addition, the green discourse has not improved Iran's environmental problems.

■ The establishment of a large number of active ENGOs in all parts of Iran was not part of a coherent government framework but simply an ad-hoc response to the increasing environmental deterioration.

■ A great majority of ENGOs lost their non-profit and independent status by receiving government grants due to government restrictions on receiving foreign funding. Large organizations are trying to receive funding from international organizations to work on environmental activities and not only carry out media campaigns or environmental awareness and training programs.

As the influence of ENGOs on the decisions of policymakers decreases, these organizations resort to following up on environmental demands through the Iranian Parliament given its legislative and oversight role. The ENGOs that are willing to do this are those organizations that have greater communication with the Parliament. This kind of communication is one of the necessary conditions for ENGOs to lobby effectively. However, the interaction and communication with the Parliament will not really influence policymakers. Nevertheless, these organizations are increasingly important as their efforts highlight environmental crises. As a result, many environmental issues are given attention by the public and the elites.<sup>(46)</sup>

As illustrated above, ENGOs avoid total confrontation with the government and the EPO. In addition, the government and the EPO are interested in building full collaborative relations with ENGOs. Therefore, the relationship

between ENGOs and the government can be described as collaborative and confrontational. In short, Iran's ENGOs have limited influence and effectiveness as they refuse to confront policymakers and EPO officials.

### **Conclusion**

The protection of the environment comes second to economic growth in Iran. This official perception of the Iranian government reflects its commitment to the resistance economy. The Iranian government overlooks the country's environmental problems and fails to solve them. The Iranian government takes arbitrary political decisions regarding the country's environmental resources. Since economic growth in Iran involves the generation of high levels of carbon dioxide emissions, the environment will be further degraded. The acceleration of economic growth accompanied by the extensive use of energy and the increasing presence of pollutants only deepens the environmental damage.

The main reason behind Iran's ineffective environmental policies is related to the complexities of its deteriorating economy, politics, and society.

Environmental threats have been exacerbated. Some aspects of this problem are irreparable. Therefore, the cost of repairing the damage has increased. However, it will not be higher than the cost of postponing alternative policies or continuing to neglect critical environmental problems. If the Iranian government does not rationalize its environmental policies and address previous mistakes, Iran will have limited available options for environmental protection, and its efforts to repair the damage to the environment and its deteriorating natural resources will be impeded. This may lead to further economic losses and increase popular pressure which could affect the social stability of Iran as a whole. Iranian leaders will be forced to prioritize the environment to address the country's mounting environmental challenges.

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# ALGERIAN FOREIGN POLICY TOWARD IRAN: BALANCING COMMITMENTS TO THE ARAB WORLD WITH NATIONAL INTERESTS

Dr. Mohammed al-Amin bin Awdah

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Lecturer, Department of Political Science  
and International Relations, University of Tamanrasset, Algeria

Political systems interact with one another within a global setting, and they have varying natures and dimensions. Decision-makers in any influential political unit in the world order base their decisions on a variety of material and moral perspectives and orientations. They act as influential determinants that shape and set the contours of their countries' foreign policies with other countries, whether at the regional or global level. Scholars of international relations explore the aforesaid perspectives and orientations to interpret how global interactions occur and the nature of relationships between countries and the criteria that influences and steer decision-makers' behavior toward influential political units. This is done to determine whether the behavior of political units is based on realism or idealism or inspired by national interests, which often expresses the strength and influence of a political unit.

Algeria, one of the heavyweight countries, at least in the Arab and African regions, is an exception to the approach of understanding how relationships between countries are interconnected in international relations. Algeria achieved independence from France in 1962, which had occupied the country for more than 130 years. Since independence, through a liberation revolution and the drafting of the country's first permanent Constitution in 1963, Algeria adopted numerous essential and well-established principles governing its domestic and foreign policies. Algeria created a new nascent revolutionary policy in the Arab and African regions based on the "Declaration of 1 November 1954" —the first independentist appeal addressed by the National Liberation Front (FLN) to the Algerian people — which granted Algeria a position among other countries, particularly in terms of providing it with a future role in the region and the world.

In this context, Algeria-Iran relations have repeatedly been the subject of heated scholarly debate. This study focuses on the determinants and history of Algeria-Iran relations, shedding light on the variables that have influenced their historical trajectory. This is in addition to reviewing their common interests and disagreements when it comes to the Arab and African regions. It is worth mentioning that the Arab world is the most controversial topic when analyzing Algeria-Iran relations; given its highly significant thorny issues.

Looking at the regional developments that have occurred in the Arab world over the last decade — beginning with the political shifts that occurred in several Arab countries like Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Libya and Yemen and the subsequent implications and significance of these shifts, as well as the decisive developments that the Palestinian cause witnessed — scholars noticed a shift in the nature of relations between Algeria and Iran. The approximation of the two countries' governments toward these aforementioned developments was harmonious. This harmonious position coincided with Iran's growing role and expanding clout in the Arab region. These events raise several research questions: what are the parameters and well-established principles of Algerian foreign policy? Can there be any talk of well-established principles governing foreign policy in light of a rapidly changing and deeply complex world order? What is the nature of the parameters that define Algeria-Iran relations toward Arab causes? How do Algerian decision-makers assess the areas of convergence and divergence with Iran? How do Algeria's foreign policymakers strike a balance between the country's commitments toward the interests of the Arab world and the benefits it can achieve by advancing its ties with Iran's political system?

When analyzing the complexities of Algeria-Iran relations, the study adopts a general hypothesis; Algeria attempts to remain equidistant from all the influential actors in the Arab region in the face of the Iranian political

system. Meanwhile, it remains keen to preserve and not to abandon its gradual order of priorities, which is the hallmark of the vision of Algerian decision-makers, which centers on achieving Algerian national interests in the first place. Given the rising concerns and fears of Arab nations over Iran's growing role in the region, it is perhaps quite complicated and difficult for Algeria to stay adherent to Arabism with brotherly Arab nations while keeping ties with influential actors in the region in order to achieve its goals; safeguarding its national interests within the framework of a gradual order of priorities.

The study aims to answer the aforesaid questions through touching on some main analytical themes and points. In the beginning, the study sheds light on the most important principles of Algeria's foreign policy and analyzes its constants and variables. Then there will be a brief review of the historical background of Algeria-Iran relations, followed by an analysis of Algeria's foreign policy balancing act between the Arab countries and Iran.

### **Principles of Algeria's Foreign Policy and Its Constants and Variables**

Many of the writings and works that have discussed Algeria's foreign policy, particularly by Algerian researchers and academics, have placed an exaggerated focus on the country's well-established foreign policy constants that require extensive examination and scrutiny — given the nature of relations between countries in general. In politics and international relations, constants and variables are always impacted by regional and international developments; therefore, one country always needs to revise its vision and perception of its standing and role with other political units in its regional and international sphere.

The ruling system in Algeria has always reiterated the well-established constant principles governing its relations with other countries. However, this does not mean that there might not be some instances of pragmatism-driven necessities or realpolitik-based moves, with Algerian decision-makers pursuing a selective approach<sup>(1)</sup> when it comes to establishing relations with other countries — away from the restrictions of the country's well-established foreign policy principles.

Algeria's foreign policy and diplomatic establishment has gone through several experiences since independence, with "well-established foreign policy principles" being the hallmark of its positions. Despite these principles, we can cite some historical incidents reflecting Algeria's selective approach as well as its "contradicting/conflicting" positions:

■ Looking at the principle of the right to self-determination, which is one of the tenets and well-established principles of Algeria's foreign policy, the country has been largely pragmatic when it comes to this principle. At times, it turned a blind eye to the principle of self-determination. The Algerian

government refused to back the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) against the Ethiopian government in the 1980s. The Ethiopian government had achieved widespread international support at that time.

■ On the other side, Algerian diplomacy during the Cold War used a variety of mechanisms and approximations which brought it closer to the Western nations, primarily the United States, building multifaceted economic relations and bonds. However, Algeria on principle sided with the Soviet Union<sup>(2)</sup> in its capacity as a backer of liberation movements that were hostile and antagonistic toward imperial Western powers.

Moving on to attempts to determine and outline the contours or principles of Algeria's foreign policy, the country's foreign agenda is inspired by several essential sources through which it established a specific approach and model of work over the decades following the early years of national independence from the French colonizers. In the same vein, the Constitutions of 1963 and 1976, as well as the 1996 Constitution, set the contours of Algeria's foreign policy in Article 86. This article stipulates that the Algerian republic must embrace the principles enshrined in the charters of the UN, the Organization of African Unity, and the Arab League.<sup>(3)</sup> These principles establish rules for inter-state relations which are based on equality and respect for national sovereignty. This is in addition to the main parameters predetermined by the declaration on November 1, 1954 — as it is considered the main source of guidance for the Algerian revolution and building the post-independence state. All the foregoing are essential foundations that determined the well-established principles and constants governing the shaping of Algerian foreign policy.

The well-established principles of Algerian foreign policy include: the principles of fighting colonial and imperial powers (Article 92 of the 1976 Constitution), the principle of cooperation between neighboring countries, the principle of peaceful resolution of disputes between neighboring countries and not resorting to the use of force. The following two principles are discussed in detail, given their significance and relevance to the study:

■ The principle of self-determination: According to Article 87 of the 1976 Constitution, supporting liberation movements is in line with Algeria's vision of good neighborliness. Algeria's solidarity with all the peoples of Africa, Asia, and Latin America in their struggle<sup>(4)</sup> for political and economic liberation and for achieving self-determination and independence is an essential principle of the country's foreign policy.<sup>(5)</sup>

■ The principle of noninterference in the internal affairs of neighboring countries: Article 93 of the 1976 Constitution stipulates that strengthening international cooperation and developing friendly relations between

countries based on equality, mutual interest and noninterference in internal affairs are essential principles of the country's national policy.

It can be said that it is quite difficult for those in charge of crafting Algeria's foreign policy to reconcile the well-established principles embraced by the country since independence in 1962 with the country's national interests and what is happening on the ground in light of constant regional and international changes. This dilemma has always put the Algerian government in an awkward position, forcing it to justify any policy that might conflict with the country's well-established foreign policy principles. This is clearly reflected in the trajectory of Algeria-Iran relations when considering Tehran's interventionist policies in Arab countries.

In light of the foregoing, Algerian diplomats and decision-makers use the inherited constitutional provisions and legal frameworks as a justification for their political orientations and decisions. This is despite the fact that these orientations and directives sometimes more or less contradict with what is happening on the ground.

### **Historical Background of Algeria-Iran Relations**

During the early 1960s, when Algeria achieved independence from France, the Algerian political leadership entered the phase of outlining the country's political vision and approximations, particularly in relation to the nature of its relationship with the four main regional spheres — the Arab, African, Islamic and Mediterranean spheres — through defining the priorities and principles that would govern the interactions within these spheres. Ultimately, the aim was to safeguard the principles and interests of Algerian foreign policy.

According to Algeria's foreign policy vision, Iran represented one of the major political units in the Islamic sphere. Algeria's national approximation and vision in this respect was based on considering Iran, along with Pakistan, one of the gateways to penetrate into the non-Arab Islamic countries. However, the relationship between the two countries over the previous decades and historical periods was marked by ups and downs. The reasons behind this fluctuation cannot be understood without considering some essential factors and indications, primarily the following:

■ The change in Algeria's model of leadership since independence. We can identify two essential models in this respect: a revolutionary/progressive model open to the world and seeking to integrate and play a regional role (in the four spheres). This model was embraced by the late Algerian presidents Houari Boumediene and Abdelaziz Bouteflika. The other model is inward-looking and less focused on regional dominance and leadership (for several reasons). The late President Chadli Bendjedid and former President Liamine Zeroual are the best representatives of this model.

■ The internal shifts and transformations in Algeria since independence. This includes the ideology ruling the country and wresting control over the political decision-making apparatuses (unilateral socialism/multilateral liberalism) or the political upheavals that impacted the very essence of the Algerian political system and radically changed its nature and structure.

■ The accelerating events in the Arab sphere: the First Gulf War, the Second Gulf War, the Iran-Iraq War, the Arab Spring, the tensions in the Maghreb (Algeria-Morocco). These events fueled intra-Arab divisions on the one hand and enhanced or weakened the bond of communication between Algeria and Tehran on the other.

Researchers who are interested in the historical evolution of Algeria-Iran relations distinguish between the different phases of bilateral relations. Each phase has a different and discernible character. Relations between the two countries shifted from being *strong/cohesive* to being characterized by *ruptures to cautious rapport*. The following discusses the aforementioned varied nature of relations between Algeria and Iran.

### **The Period of Establishing and Strengthening Relations**

It is well known that official relations between the two countries began directly after Algeria achieved independence in 1962. But the roots of their relations date back to the French colonization era as the Algerian national movement received political support for its orientations and just cause from the Iranian political leadership at that time — for the sake of combating French colonization and struggling to secure freedom and the right to self-determination for the Algerian people. Hence, the initial motives for establishing their relationship had a profound historical context.

It should be made clear that the first phase following the establishment of Algeria-Iran relations — especially if we opt to focus on the phase from 1962-1991, three full decades — saw three Algerian presidents (Ahmed Ben Bella, Houari Boumediene, Chadli Bendjedid) enter the Palace of El Mouradia (the residence of Algerian presidents). Late Algerian President Houari Boumediene was instrumental in cementing and strengthening ties with Iran. This was primarily attributed to the president's charismatic leadership at the time, as well as his revolutionary orientations in all of Algeria's regional spheres (Maghreb, Arab, African, Islamic).

Looking at the events that impacted Algeria's relations with Iran during that period, several can be identified as cementing Algeria's relationship with Tehran. Algerian diplomacy did all it could to secure all forms of national interests with Iran. Algeria was also keen to play a leadership role to keep a presence in Iran's regional sphere. Algeria did this through several moves, foremost of which were: Algerian mediation efforts in the border dispute between Iraq and Iran, the diplomatic efforts to end the Iran-Iraq War,

Algeria's contributions to ending the US hostage crisis in Iran<sup>(6)</sup> and taking care of Iranian interests in the United States. All of these Algerian moves reflect the fact that the Iranian government trusted the Algerian leadership and that political ties between the two countries were strong at the time.

### **The Period of Tensions and Rupture**

For Algeria, the second half of the 1980s until the early 1990s represented a historical period full of regional and international shifts (the expanding democratic transition in the Eastern European nations, and the collapse of the Soviet Union). In addition, the nature of the Algerian ruling system underwent radical and crucial changes. All of the aforementioned shifts and changes pushed the country into what is known as the "Black Decade," characterized by domestic unrest, political/security instability, diplomatic isolation, and the recalibration of the country's global relations. Algeria's relationship with Iran was impacted by the developments and changes that took place during this period. The relationship shifted from strength to tensions and rupture.

It was not long before the internal events in Algeria accelerated that signs and warnings of tensions emerged between the Algerian and Iranian governments. Suspending the Algerian elections in 1991 following the Islamic Salvation Front's triumph and the subsequent events (the resignation of President Chadli Bendjedid, the suspension of the Constitution, and the army's intervention) represented the final straw in Algeria-Iran relations. Iran denounced the annulment of the election results by the Algerian authorities, a move that was deemed by the Algerian political leadership as a blatant intervention in its internal affairs.

Historical incidents prove that Algeria's decision-makers were concerned about Iran's role in their country before tensions flared up between the two countries. These tensions were particularly related to the rapprochement between the Wilayat al-Faqih system and the leaders of the banned front whose President Abbasi Madani was received by high-profile officials in Iran and met with the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. The front received \$5 million in funding.<sup>(7)</sup> The conservative wing in Iran lauding the assassination of the late Algerian President Mohamed Boudiaf was the final straw, leading the two countries to sever their diplomatic ties in March 1993.

### **The Period of Cautious Resumption of Relations**

After nearly a decade of political rupture between Algeria and Iran, interspersed with Iranian attempts to re-establish ties during the tenure of former President Liamine Zeroual, the thaw in relations between the two parties began with the election of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika in 1999. Several researchers attribute this diplomatic breakthrough to a meeting between the two heads of state (Bouteflika and Khatami) on the sidelines of the UN General



Assembly in New York in September 2000. The meeting paved the way for the reappointment of diplomats and diplomatic exchanges in October 2001.

On the other hand, we cannot speak of this rapprochement and resumption of relations without first taking a look at the circumstances and conditions in Algeria in particular. President Abdelaziz Bouteflika came to power with a two-pronged agenda: on the one hand, calming and building internal peace through various policies and approaches (civil harmony, the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation), and on the other, resuming foreign relations with the country's neighbors in a way that would restore the standing of Algeria's diplomacy overseas and earn him international support for his internal policies and orientations. This explains the shuttle tours of Bouteflika to most of the world's countries during his first presidential term as well as the Algerian initiatives to resolve regional disputes such as the Eritrea-Ethiopia dispute and concluding the Algiers Agreement in 2000.<sup>(8)</sup>

In this context, Iran, for Algerian decision-makers, represented one of the countries with which relations should be resumed — though on a cautious and gradual basis. Iran's political determination to forge new alliances in the Arab world should not be ignored, particularly amid the shifts on the international arena following the 9/11 attacks, and the start of the US-Western restrictions on Iran's pursuit to develop its nuclear program. These developments made Iran feel the need to create new allies, particularly within the framework of OPEC. Therefore, Iran rushed to bless and support Bouteflika's Civil Concord approximation, in addition to positively responding to setting up the joint Algeria-Iran economic commission in January 2003 which aimed to bolster cooperation in the industrial and agricultural sectors. The two countries inked 18 bilateral cooperation agreements covering transportation, industry, investment and the judiciary following the visit of Bouteflika to Tehran from October 17 to October 20, 2003.<sup>(9)</sup>

Through tracking the course of Algeria-Iran relations since their inception, it becomes clear that Algerian foreign policy — while interacting with Iran — mostly conflicts with its well-established principles:

■ Interference in the internal affairs of other countries is a major redline in Algeria's foreign policy approximations: despite it being an expansionist and interventionist state in the Arab sphere, especially following the 1979 revolution, this did not weaken Tehran's relations with Algeria. But after the Algerian government sensed the danger drawing closer to its inner circle early in the 1990s, the Algerian foreign policy compass shifted toward severing ties with Iran.

■ Algeria's attempt to play a leading role in the Arab/Islamic sphere necessitated building and cementing ties with several states, including Iran.

The charismatic character of Algerian presidents played a key role in this attempt (Houari Boumediene, Abdelaziz Bouteflika).

■ Algeria's foreign policy toward Iran is not dependent on the nature of the elite ruling and controlling Tehran or the core tenets of the Iranian political system. At this point, it is important to mention that Algeria-Iran relations remained good and cohesive despite the radical shift in the Iranian political system in 1979. This shift did not impact Algeria's policy toward Tehran as long as relations remained consistent with the country's orientations (to play a leading role in the region). Furthermore, it had no bearing on Algeria pursuing its internal interests. The Iranian political system is unimportant for Algeria, in contrast to its brotherly Arab nations that are concerned about the Wilayat al-Faqih ruling system in Iran.

### **Algeria's Foreign Policy and the Balancing Act Between the Arab World and Iran**

It is critical to analyze Algeria's foreign policy toward Iran in light of the Arab context. When talking about Arab-Iran relations in general, it is important to study the pattern of Algeria-Iran relations. Each category has distinct characteristics and different policies with different determinants, backgrounds, and realities. The Arab countries and influential actors, when interacting with successive Iranian governments, especially since the 1979 revolution, can be divided into three categories:

■ Arab governments totally opposing Iranian orientations and policies in the Arab world, viewing them as a threat to their existence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. These governments include Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain.

■ Arab political systems, forces and formations supportive of and aligned with the Iranian political system. They are in harmony with the tenets and agenda of Tehran in the Arab world to the extent that they receive all sorts of financial and military support from the Wilayat al-Faqih power structure. This category includes the Syrian regime, the Lebanese Hezbollah, the Houthi militia in Yemen and Shiite proxy groups in Iraq.

■ Arab systems in the gray zone. On many occasions, relations with Iran have been marked by ambiguity and contradiction, as well as circumstance-dictated pragmatism. In this regard, Algeria's approach to Iran stands out in comparison to the approach of other Arab countries. While it is simple to analyze and specify the parameters of Arab-Iran relations in the first and second categories, it is more difficult to explain and analyze the pattern of relations with Iran in the third category. Furthermore, predicting its future becomes extremely complicated.

Algeria is undoubtedly aware that its middle-ground position when it comes to its relations with Iran in comparison to the rest of the Arab countries

provides it with some flexibility and room for maneuver. This can be crucial for Algeria when responding to various developments directly related to Iran's policies in the Arab world. Algeria is among a few Arab countries that has maintained stable relations with Iran since its independence despite some blows down the road on a few occasions.<sup>(10)</sup> However, the policy of adopting a middle-ground position mostly conflicts with Algeria's declared principles and obligations toward the Arab world and its essential causes. Nonetheless, defenders of this Algerian approach cite several justifications, most notably:

- That the region and the Arab political systems, at least over the past three decades, have gone through a host of transformations and changes that have impacted several aspects and frameworks of joint Arab action. As a result, the concept of Arab consensus has been rendered ineffective and ambiguous when it comes to addressing issues of common interest. This is a critical conundrum that in turn has contributed to causing a schism in the Arab house (intra-Arab relations) — not only regarding the positions of Arab states and governments toward Iran, but even toward other principal actors in the Middle East and Turkey.

- The lack of a unified vision of Arab national security, enabling the identification of real sources of threat to security. A group of Arab countries, primarily the Arab Gulf states, view Iran under the leadership and philosophy of Wilayat al- Faqih ruling the country since 1979 as the biggest threat to the Arab world (its interests, territorial integrity, security, sovereignty, and independence). Meanwhile, this concern may be nonexistent or present to a lesser extent in some other countries, such as Algeria. And it could be completely absent in other countries. The Arab decision-makers' assessment of the importance and indicators of Arab national security has produced this state of divergence and variance in foreign policy toward Iran, as well as their divergence in assessing the enormity and extent of the threat it poses to the Arab region.

Arab governments have experienced changes and transformations in their policies over the last three decades. Furthermore, Algeria's foreign policy has been impacted by various factors (external and internal) that have shaped the country's diplomatic performance and output. Some of the factors include the following:

- Algeria, as a nation that achieved independence in 1962, has gone through experiences that can be characterized as divergent and even contradictory at times —in terms of the nature of the system of government, and the prevalent ideological orientations (from a one-party socialist system to a pluralistic liberal system).

- The "Black Decade" (1990-2000) led to Algeria's isolation at the regional (Maghreb, Africa, Arab world) and global levels. It caused national and

domestic orientations to become prevalent in the mindset and thinking of Algerian decision-makers. Here one can recall the symbolic policies of the Algerian government during the “Black Decade” such as the ones under the former President Liamine Zéroual who popularized the slogan “Algeria before anything.”<sup>(11)</sup>

■ All the aforementioned changes and transformations were accompanied by a steep and significant decline in the appeal of the Arabist movement — the nationalist-Arabist current — of which Algeria was one of the most important and principal pillars and actors. This contributed to reprioritizing the foreign policy agenda of all Arab countries, including Algeria.

On the other hand, it is necessary not to ignore the nature of Iranian actions in shaping relations between Algeria and Iran. It is critical to acknowledge that there is a watertight Iranian reading and approximation toward analyzing Algerian movements and predicting Algeria’s behavior and foreign policies and comprehending its parameters — through focusing on the most sensitive issues for Algerian decision-makers.

The Iranian leadership worked to implement several approximations to edge closer to the decision-making circles in Algeria. Tehran has constantly asserted that it supports the highly sensitive issues of Algeria’s foreign policy like its visions toward the Arab-Israel conflict, its mechanism to resolve the conflict in the Western Sahara and mend relations with Morocco. It is no secret for those who observe Iran, through its efforts to move closer to Algeria, that it seeks to achieve several objectives, including:

■ To win new allies in the Arab world, which will help in diminishing the number of Arab countries that oppose its policies, thus facilitating the creation of schisms and divisions in the Arab house.

■ To use Algeria as a gateway to penetrate the Maghreb and North Africa after previously making great efforts to penetrate West Africa and the Horn of Africa.

■ To take advantage of Algeria’s position in OPEC against the backdrop of mounting international pressures because of its nuclear file and Western sanctions on its energy industry. Both Iran and Algeria possess the second biggest and sixth-biggest gas reserves in the world. This prompted the two countries in 2009, along with Russia, Nigeria, and Qatar, to seek to establish an organization for gas-exporting nations.<sup>(12)</sup>

Several research and press reports are paying attention to and focusing on the improvement in Algeria-Iran relations, especially in the fields of economic cooperation and trade, especially since the end of the rupture in relations when former President Abdelaziz Bouteflika came to power. Nonetheless, one should not be limited to this approximation when attempting to assess the course and effectiveness of this relationship. The economic quantum leap that

resulted from this rapprochement (trade doubling to \$50 million in 2008 and developing a joint plan to raise trade to \$300 million)<sup>(13)</sup> and all the growing figures between the two countries are insufficient for fully understanding the essence of the dynamics of Algeria-Iran relations, especially if the political dimension is set aside.

It is patently clear that there is an undeclared and tacit focus by the two countries to provide mutual political support for respective central foreign policy issues.

As for Algeria, it does not view in principle that its rapprochement with Iran is causing harm to Arab national interests. In this context, Algeria mostly acts in a selective manner when adopting positions toward Arab countries and Iran — as is the case with its refusal to engage in or even support the Operation Storm of Resolve led by Saudi Arabia against the Houthi militia in Yemen and committing to neutrality and “absolute” noninterference in regard to the events in Iraq and Syria since 2003 and 2011 consecutively. But on the ground and over time, Algeria could develop some awareness of the blatant Iranian attempts to destabilize the region and threaten territorial integrity.

Algeria does not hesitate to use all its political weight to address any threats posed to its borders. At this point, there is a need to review the governing constitutional principles related to the role of the Algerian army beyond the country’s borders through the amendments made to Articles 29 and 95 in the 2020 Constitution. These amendments enabled the Algerian army to carry out operations overseas under the auspices of the UN. Furthermore, the resolutions of the Arab League and the efforts made by the African Union bodies must also be considered. For example, Algeria expelled the Iranian cultural attaché in 2018 over accusations of seeking to spread Shiism in Algeria.

Algeria maintains a fair distance and relationship with Iran to secure its support on several issues, including the Western Sahara issue which involves Morocco and Algeria vying to win backing for their respective positions. This is in addition to supporting Algeria’s position on the Arab-Israeli conflict. In the context of the aforementioned, Iran attempts to take advantage of its relationship with Algeria to score political points/leverage as follows:

■ Iran’s limitless support for Algeria’s vision to resolve the Western Sahara issue: Iran realizes that Algeria is a heavyweight in the Maghreb and North Africa on the one hand and it can push Algeria against Morocco as it is deemed to be openly opposed to and antagonistic to its policies in the region.

■ Playing on the heartstrings of the Algerian people through supporting the Palestinian cause: supporting the Algerian position centered on rejecting all sorts of normalization with the “Zionist regime.” The Iranian leadership avowedly declared support for Algeria’s severing of its ties with Morocco<sup>(14)</sup> due

to the escalation of its hostile campaign against Algeria, especially during the period that followed Israel-Morocco normalization. Iran has also expanded the scope of its cooperation with Algeria to include the military and defense fields.

Iranian decision-makers believe that it is timely to start rapprochement with Algeria in light of several realities (countering the Kingdom of Morocco, winning a new ally in the Maghreb and North Africa, and securing a foothold in the Arab world) and completing the project of Iranian expansion in Africa.

Iran has penetrated the Horn of Africa and West Africa by opening more than 30 Iranian embassies and seizing control of more than 80 percent of the companies in Sierra Leone that are responsible for collecting and exporting cacao, coffee, and diamonds. It has established complex business networks in West African countries, particularly among Lebanese Shiites.<sup>(15)</sup>

Therefore, Algeria's foreign policy calculus and order of priorities — which place emphasis on the Western Sahara issue and the country's relationship with the Kingdom of Morocco — which are exploited by Iran, may in the near future collide with Tehran's project and its completion. Iran's expansionist project is creeping closer to the country's southern borders after dominating the West African region. Thus, looking into this argument reveals part of the Algeria-Iran pragmatic relationship and its dimensions and visions with diverse and divergent roots and backgrounds. Iran sees Algeria as part of a larger expansionist strategy with an objective to infiltrate the African continent and divide the Arab world. Whereas Algeria views Iran as a temporary and circumstance-driven tool that assists it in gaining support and solidarity for the issues deemed central to Algeria's foreign policy. Therefore, achieving a balance between each country's national objectives makes their relations quite complex.

## **Conclusion**

The history of Algeria's diplomacy since independence is rich in events and achievements. Despite the relatively recent establishment of its foreign policy vision after gaining independence, the determinants and the general framework of Algeria's foreign policy warrant further in-depth analysis. This is due to its complicated and sometimes ambiguous details — despite its clear objectives and avowed principles. This is normal given the fact that international practices always result in complex changes, in which constants and variables become intertwined.

In this context, Algeria's foreign policy toward Iran still requires further research and analysis — especially in light of the tremendous shifts on the regional and global stage over the past three decades. These have significantly impacted the standing of several Arab governments, threatening their

existence, territorial integrity, and sovereignty. This comes amid the extremely dangerous role played by Iran in instigating chaos, particularly in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen.

Hence, Algerian decision-makers must consider these shifts and review the concept of national security within its broad Arab sense and its narrow national one. Algeria continuing to pursue its approach of adopting a middle ground, especially in light of Iran's significant penetration into the Arab and African regions via its proxies will inevitably lead to collision with the Iranian project which will eventually knock on the doors of the Maghreb and North Africa — though in the medium term.

On the other side, the oscillation which Algeria's foreign policy has experienced is determined by a host of factors surrounding the Arab world. These factors are related to the intra-Arab disagreements and differences, especially with regard to the issues deemed the most sensitive for the ruling system in Algeria; the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Algeria-Morocco disagreement on the issue of Western Sahara. Iran has exploited these vulnerabilities and rifts to infiltrate deep into the cohesion of the Arab world to score the biggest possible gains and create political cleavages among the countries of the Arab order.

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# 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.

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# BOOK REVIEW

## IRAN'S INFLUENCE IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Review by

Dr. Abdel-Raouf Mostafa al-Ghoneimi



Book by

Dr. Mohammed bin Saqr Alsulami

Mahmoud Hamdi Aboulqasem

Over the past four decades, the theocratic regime in Iran has been attempting to create spheres of influence and possess further bargaining chips across sub-Saharan Africa. This region is of particular importance for the greater Iranian strategy which aims to turn Iran into a force so that its policies and strategies influence regional and international equations in a significant way.

This strategy also aims to increase Iran's involvement in global affairs, enable it to achieve its political interests as well as economic and geopolitical goals, and disseminate its ideology within its living spaces (Lebensraums). The latter is part of the most sublime Iranian goal: the establishment of an allegedly global Islamic government led by the guardian jurist in Iran.

The significance of Africa for Iran is attributed to a number of factors such as its location overlooking international waterways through which strategic commodities and international trade pass. The continent also has vast resources, strategic commodities and a massive market over which world powers vie for control. Several international companies are competing to enter the African market because of the continent's fertile environment for investments. For Iran, Africa's resources could help it to mitigate the impact of sanctions. Africa has long been an Iranian political ally, particularly because of their shared anti-hegemonic and anti-imperialistic outlook. Moreover, the continent possesses a sizable voting bloc that could help Iran in international organizations. Furthermore, given current regional and international efforts, Iran seeks to create areas of influence in Africa and limit Saudi Arabia's religious reach in several African countries.

The book provides an analysis of Iran's clout in sub-Saharan Africa with the aim of examining the nature and extent of its influence. The book specifies the stages of Iran's expansionism in its living spaces and how this has led to the spread of Shiism, the politicization of Shiism, and the militarization of Shiism. The extent of Iranian expansionism differs from one stage to another, with the aim being to create areas of influence and possess further bargaining chips to achieve strategic objectives in Africa. The cost of confronting Iranian expansionism differs from one stage to another. It decreases in the stage of spreading Shiism and increases in the subsequent stages, particularly when countering militarized Shiism. The book also sounds the alarm bell about the dangers of Iran transitioning from the stage of spreading Shiism to its politicization and militarization, citing examples of Iranian expansionism in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. In these countries, Iran resorted to militarizing Shiism. These countries have buckled under political, security and economic crises and sectarian conflicts, rendering some of them to be designated as failed states.

The book, by the questions it raises through its different chapters, attempts to reveal the dimensions and features of Iran's role in sub-Saharan Africa. Chapter one sheds light on Iranian clout in East Africa through touching on the significance of this African region in Iran's strategy, the limits of its influence in this region, and the tools it possesses to influence the countries that fall within this region. In this chapter, the book measures the scope of Iranian influence and its presence in the East African countries, given

that Iran's relationship with these countries is regarded as among the most enhanced within sub-Saharan Africa. Chapter two, meanwhile, spotlights Iran's relationship with West Africa within the context of Iran's strategy to influence the African continent, and its pursuit to create alternative space for maneuverability, particularly after it began to face challenges in North and East Africa.

Chapter three also casts light on the dimensions of the Iranian presence in Central Africa through touching on the importance of this African region in the Iranian strategy, particularly at the economic and political levels. This is in addition to Iran's tools of influence to expand its clout in Central Africa, and the extent of its presence in this region. Chapter four reviews Iran's relationship with the Southern African countries in light of its unique historical relationship with these countries which has been affected by the shifts in the global order and the US-Iran dispute. It also discusses the ebbing Iranian ideological and religious influences in the region and the impact of such ebbs on Iran's relations with the Southern African countries, which are pragmatic in nature and distinct from Iran's patterns of relations with countries in other African regions.

In chapter five, the book specifies the strategic dimensions of the Iranian presence on Africa's eastern coast. This region is of particular importance for Iranian policymakers. The chapter provides a strategic vision regarding the motives behind the Iranian presence on the eastern coast of Africa and its attempts to expand its maritime deployment to encircle the Arabian Gulf and to achieve its strategic objectives in the face of regional and international pressures. This presence is definitely not without hints of Iran's desire to expand its maritime clout in the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea to the Syrian coast. This maritime clout is in line with Tehran's planned corridor linking it to the Mediterranean via Syria.

Chapter six discusses Iran's relations with Africa's countries in the context of regional and international competition and the new tussle over Africa — particularly given Turkey's presence in Africa and the nature of relations between Tehran and Ankara in this context. This is discussed in light of the disagreements between Iran and Turkey and possibilities for future rapprochement between the two countries. Chapter seven focuses on Iran's response in light of US and Israeli attempts to contain its influence on the African continent. These attempts are against the backdrop of Iran seeking to create areas of influence and possess further bargaining chips that it could potentially deploy against the United States and Israel to maximize its room for maneuverability and the scope of its clout.

The eighth and last chapter touch on the Gulf states' policies to counter the growing Iranian clout in sub-Saharan Africa due to the danger it poses

to the vital interests of the Gulf. As a result, the Gulf states have taken the initiative to counter Iranian tools to prevent Iran's deeper penetration into the continent. They sought to reestablish their soft power in Africa by providing bilateral and multilateral humanitarian aid to combat diseases and pandemics, as well as forging long-term partnerships and relationships with the sub-Saharan African countries. Gulf efforts to establish a strong presence in Africa are ongoing, as it is one of the most important arenas of influence and competition among regional and international actors.

Through its varied chapters, the book identifies outcomes that are very important for understanding the dimensions and challenges facing Iranian clout in sub-Saharan Africa and its future across the continent. Iran's schemes in East Africa are facing impediments, with it facing difficulties in creating a politicized base which conforms to its agenda. This is due to the limited Shiite community in East Africa and the growing concerns of governments in this region about Iran's campaigns to disseminate Shiism. Cases of Iranian interventions in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen have painted a negative picture about Tehran's intentions and motives, which were essentially ideologically-driven, with the aim to export its revolutionary model and create proxy groups to implement Iranian schemes to the detriment of the security and stability of the aforementioned countries. Therefore, some East African countries now view Iran as one of the sponsors of sectarian strife and confessional infighting. Seven East African countries have already severed their ties with Iran, meaning that Tehran's relationship with these countries is suffering from a noticeable deterioration and retreat.

Additionally, Iran has turned into an unreliable partner for West Africa as a result of it not honoring its obligations and agreements due to the sanctions. Iran is also accused of inflaming internal conflicts and supporting armed militias in countries such as Senegal and Nigeria. This is one way in which Iran threatens the security and stability of West Africa, similar to its intervention in Syria. In light of this pattern of Iranian intervention, the West African countries have imposed severe restrictions on Iranian activities.

The Central African region is where Iran wields the least clout. Additionally, since the shifts in the global order in the early 1990s, Iran's relations with the sub-Saharan African countries have been ebbing and flowing. Iran failed to establish a long-term military presence on the Red Sea coast of Eritria, while other world powers did. Its presence was limited to fixed and insignificant maritime outposts, particularly after the formation of the Arab Coalition to Support Legitimacy in Yemen, as well as regional and international recognition of the need to limit Iran's role in Africa. As a result, some regional and international powers repositioned themselves in the region by establishing military bases, reducing the scope of Iran's clout in the region. Among the

key revelations of the book is that Iran has been incapable of confronting rival global powers in Africa, particularly the Gulf states. Iran lacks economic potential, financial surpluses and effective cooperation agreements with several African countries. Internal and external challenges, economic sanctions, and international isolation have impacted Iran's acceptance as a partner by a number of African countries. As a result, Iran's competitors have had no trouble countering its clout in this arena. The Iranian project primarily rests on self-destructive factors. In this context, it is critical to examine Iran's role in this arena, its scope and impact, as well as the scope of its impact on the regional and global balance of power in comparison to that of its rivals. Saudi Arabia is playing a prominent role in this context by reactivating its diplomacy and warning of the danger posed by Iran and its expansionist project in the continent. These Saudi efforts have served as a wake-up call for many African leaders and decision-makers, prompting them to reconsider their relations with Iran. They have demanded that ties be built on mutual respect, rather than Iran's ideology and its regional or international disputes.

The book reveals a variety of impediments that Iran faces in Africa, primarily because of its ideological orientations and expansionist ambitions. Its orientations are influenced by its long-running dispute with regional and international powers. Iranian orientations mean that Tehran's visions and relations with others are one-sided, i.e., based on exploitation and employment of the other. Thus, Iran did not establish ties based on equality, balance, shared interests, and mutual respect. So, this relationship with Africa lacked continuity and sustainability and remained limited and confined to serving Iranian objectives. In the end, it declined after its project was exposed in some regional countries. For example, Iran's project made great advances within the Arabian arena, where it progressed to the stage of militarization and integrating its Shiite proxies into political systems that fall within its spheres of influence such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq. Further, its schemes in sub-Saharan African countries remain limited to the stage of spreading Shiism. Only a few countries have entered the stage of politicization and an even fewer number have entered the stage of militarization such as Nigeria. Africa represents a backdrop to the Arab region within the framework of Iran's strategy to export its revolutionary model which it seeks to spread throughout the world.

In its conclusion, the book sheds light on Iran's failure to present a model state in any of the countries where it created armed proxies such as in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and the African countries. Moreover, Iran has never been an appealing development model for the African countries, all of which aspire to eradicate poverty. Most of the agreements and protocols of cooperation signed between Iran and several African countries have not come into force and

remain merely ink on paper. This has led to resentment in African countries. Furthermore, there are no major interests that make the relationship sustainable, nor is there strong cooperation making it impossible to abandon Iran. According to the Iranians, Africa is a vast arena which can be penetrated in order to promote their expansionist agenda. This has compelled African countries to reconsider their relations with Tehran and develop policies to counter the Iranian project before it progresses to a point where it cannot be reversed or reaches the advanced stages of politicization and militarization to the detriment of security and stability. African countries want to avoid repeating the experiences of other countries where Iranian clout reached the stage of militarization and witnessed the integration of Iran-backed Shiite proxies.

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