The Islamic Republic of Iran’s Relations with the Republic of Tajikistan in the Post-Soviet Period

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Authorship Declaration

I hereby declare and confirm that this thesis is entirely the result of my own work except where otherwise indicated, and has not been submitted, either in whole or part, for a higher degree or qualification at this or any other university or institute.

Brenton Clark
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Abstract

This thesis seeks to uncover the motivations, objectives, and outcomes of Iran’s foreign relations with Tajikistan between 1991 and 2013. In doing so, the thesis maps out the course of relations between Iran and Tajikistan throughout the post-Soviet period, and in the process seeks to better understand the domestic, regional, and international obstacles that have faced Iran in its efforts to build ties with its so-called “close cultural cousin”, Tajikistan. Furthermore, this dissertation seeks to better understand how the presence of strong ethno-linguistic bonds and a set of shared mutual threats and strategic interests have acted as key drivers in building ties between these two countries. In attempting to outline the basis of Iranian-Tajik ties, this thesis argues that relations between these two states have been consistently hampered by not only mutual mistrust and misunderstanding, but also significant regional and international instability, which has often cruelled the ability for Iranian and Tajik elites to sustain close bilateral political, economic, cultural, and strategic relations over the past two decades.
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Note on Transliteration

Persian words that appear in this work were transliterated into their most common English forms. However, for words that are not often used in English, I applied a simplified version of the *Iranian Studies* journal guidelines. For simplicity I did not use diacritical marks. Iranian calendar dates have been translated into their Western calendar equivalent.
**Introduction**

*Iran and Tajikistan share the same destiny, therefore Iran’s progress is Tajikistan’s progress.*

- **Former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad**

> Cooperation between Tajikistan and Iran....is based on the eternal background of common language, culture and historic traditions of friendship and brotherhood of the peoples of both countries.

- **Tajik President Emomali Rahmon**

The Islamic Republic of Iran’s foreign policy interests, motivations, and behaviours have been the source of considerable controversy and analysis for more than three decades. Iran’s post-revolutionary regional and international ambitions, theocratic form of governance, and nuclear program have provided vital sustenance to Western political analyses, and placed Iran front and centre of global affairs. Although Iranian foreign policy has been a subject of significant academic importance throughout the post-revolutionary period, overwhelmingly the existing corpus of scholarly literature has focused upon a limited, albeit prominent, set of issue areas. In particular, scholars have almost obsessively focused upon Iran’s confrontational relations with a number of states within the Middle East and the West, and proffered a variety of analytical accounts relating to Iran’s involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict, the spread of Islamist militancy, the politics of oil, and nuclear proliferation. While such accounts have played a major role in shaping understandings of Iran’s foreign policies and interactions within the international system, they have also had the effect of implying Iran’s actions outside of

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such contentious contexts are of little importance, or are indeed peripheral to the study of Iran as a political subject. This, however, is not the case.

Over recent years, a number of developments have taken shape within Iranian foreign policy that have either escaped widespread attention or systematic scholarly analysis. This is particularly apparent in the context of Iran’s relations with the post-Soviet states of Central Asia. Within this geographical and political context, Iran has made a considerable effort to develop important political, economic, and cultural relations with a number of states within this region. These efforts have been especially apparent in respect to Iran’s relations with the post-Soviet Central Asian state of the Republic of Tajikistan. Although Tajikistan is small in geographical size, it has, on the surface at least, assumed a prominent and symbolic position within broader Iranian foreign policy-making, and international politics more generally.

Overwhelmingly over the past two decades Iranian elites have sought to highlight an exceedingly harmonious bilateral relationship with Tajikistan that is anchored in the depths of not only shared culture, language, and history, but also common politico-strategic interests. While such narratives have often been taken at face value by regional observers, rarely have the empirical foundations of Iran’s ties with Tajikistan been examined. This dissertation seeks to make a modest contribution to overcoming this state of affairs by providing the first in-depth Western (English language) scholarly analysis of this important, yet very new, bilateral relationship.

**Research Question**

This thesis at the fundamental level seeks to uncover what the motivations, objectives, and outcomes of Iran’s foreign relations with Tajikistan were between 1991 and 2013.

In answering this research question, the dissertation will map out the course of relations between Iran and Tajikistan throughout the post-Soviet period, and in the process attempt to better understand the domestic, regional, and international obstacles that have faced Iran in its efforts to build ties with its so-called “close cultural cousin”, Tajikistan.
Furthermore, this dissertation also seeks to better understand how the presence of strong ethno-linguistic bonds and a set of shared mutual threats and strategic interests have acted as key drivers in building ties between these two countries.

In attempting to outline and uncover the basis of Iranian-Tajik ties, this thesis argues that relations between these two states have been consistently hampered by not only bilateral mutual mistrust and misunderstanding, but also significant regional and international instability, which has often cruelled the ability of Iranian and Tajik elites to sustain close bilateral political, economic, cultural, and strategic relations over the past two decades.

**Scope of Thesis**

In studying the course of Iranian-Tajik relations, this thesis focuses primarily on the period between Tajikistan’s independence in 1991 up until the close of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s presidency in 2013. There are two major reasons for this limited time frame.

While it is conceded that people-to-people contacts between Tajiks and Persians have taken place for hundreds of years, this thesis places the focus of its attention almost exclusively on inter-state political and diplomatic relations. Therefore, Tajikistan as a state—defined at the most basic level as a political entity exercising sovereignty over a territory and recognised by other states—did not “exist” until after it gained independence in 1991. While the Tajik Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (and later the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic) was founded in 1924, it was never a sovereign state, being fully subsumed under the political framework of the broader Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

Secondly, by concluding the study before the inauguration of the presidency of Hassan Rouhani in 2013, this thesis provides a better understanding of the changes and continuities which took place throughout the presidential terms of Ali Akbar Rafsanjani (1989-1997), Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005), and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013). At the time of writing, the presidency of Hassan Rouhani (2013-2015) is still at its early to middle phase. Focusing on only a limited period of Rouhani’s presidency would not have provided a clear picture of the trajectory of Iran’s ties with Tajikistan. This self-
imposed time limitation does not detract from the significance of changes and continuities in the preceding periods.

Finally, it is important to note at the outset that this thesis should not be viewed as a comprehensive history of Iranian-Tajik relations. Instead, it is an analysis which largely limits itself to inter-state and inter-political elite interactions that have taken place between the two countries. By taking such an approach, this thesis provides important context to what are a much broader, and indeed richer, set of societal, and cultural relations which exist outside of the frame of so-called high politics.

Structure of Thesis

Introduction

The introduction lays out the key components of the analysis, situating the research within the existing corpus of literature, outlines the theoretical, methodological, and analytical framework, and explains the contributions of the thesis.

Chapter One: The Islamic Republic of Iran: The Domestic Context

This chapter provides a broad overview of some of the more salient elements of Iran’s domestic environment, which influence its foreign policy agendas. This chapter outlines Iran’s geographical situation and resource base, describing the vulnerabilities, opportunities, and unchangeable material realities that face Iranian policy elites in the making of foreign policy. Furthermore, a description of Iran’s national identity is provided, examining the role nationalism and Islam play in informing Iran’s foreign policies and the worldviews, and perceptions of its elites. Finally, a broad overview of Iran’s byzantine political system is provided, with an examination of the key institutions and figures that influence and implement foreign policy in the Islamic Republic.

Chapter Two: The Islamic Republic of Iran: The Regional and International Context

This chapter analyses the significant regional and international challenges Iran has had to face in attempting to establish relations with Tajikistan and the Central Asian region following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The chapter contends that Iran’s arguably
very limited success in the region can be directly attributed to the formation of a post-Soviet unipolar international system overseen by Iran’s bitter rival and the world’s sole superpower, the United States. Over the past 20 years, the United States has conducted a range of foreign policy actions that have restricted Iran’s policies in Central Asia. Furthermore, Iran has also had to confront significant instability, and a series of regional rivals and so-called “partners”, most notably Russia and Turkey, who have consistently sidelined and undermined Tehran, thus further weakening its regional and international position throughout the past 20 years.

Through analysing the wider regional and international dynamics that have affected Iran’s interactions with Central Asia, this chapter provides the context for the investigation by this thesis of Iran’s bilateral relations with Tajikistan, which has often been held to ransom by regional and international dynamics far beyond either state’s control.

Chapter Three: The Historical Context of Iranian-Tajik Relations

This chapter provides an historical overview of Iran’s relations with Tajikistan prior to its independence in 1991. The chapter contends that despite the popularisation of the narrative that Iran and Tajikistan are irredeemably linked by more than 1000 years of shared history and culture, relations between Iranians and Tajiks prior to 1991 were instead characterised by long periods of disjuncture, apathy, and distrust on both a societal and political level. The chapter highlights that warm Iranian-Tajik state and societal relations are very much a new phenomenon, which have their roots more in the political exigencies of the past 30 years than in the depths of a 1000-year historical past.

Chapter Four: Iran and Tajikistan 1991-1997 – Independence and War

This chapter analyses Iran’s early interactions with independent Tajikistan during the presidency of Ali Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997). This chapter focuses its attention upon Iran’s foreign policy behaviour during the Tajik Civil War, and its interactions not only with the Tajik government and opposition, but also with the other prominent regional party to this conflict, Russia. In doing so, this chapter provides context to the conflict that tore Tajikistan apart, necessarily outlining the key factors and actors involved in the Tajik Civil War, and examines Iran’s actions throughout this conflict and the drawn-out peace
process which followed the terrible violence that gripped Tajikistan between 1992 and 1997.

The chapter argues that Iran’s support for opposition groups, in particular the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), has been considerably exaggerated. Furthermore, the notion that Iran was attempting to spread its Islamic Revolution to Tajikistan is not accurate. Rather, promoting Islamic revolutionary ideologies, and supporting the Tajik “Islamists” were never paramount in Iran’s political calculations. The chapter argues that throughout the conflict Iran overwhelmingly acted as a pragmatic—if not surreptitious—actor, which placed its own material state interests and regional position above all other concerns.

Chapter Five: Iran and Tajikistan 1997-2005 – Regional Competition and Instability

This chapter analyses the political, cultural, and economic interactions between Iran and Tajikistan throughout the eight-year period of the Mohammed Khatami administration (1997-2005). This chapter argues that Iran’s foreign policies in Tajikistan throughout the presidency of Khatami, while continuing on the pragmatic path set during the Tajik Civil War period, underwent both a period of stagnation and transformation. It is argued that the Khatami administration throughout its first four-year term displayed an almost complete disregard towards developments in Tajikistan. However, following the events of September 11, 2001, which saw a greater US presence in the Central Asian region, Iran’s engagement with Tajikistan was forced to rapidly shifted gears.

The chapter argues that Iran’s renewed interest in Tajikistan following 9/11 was motivated by geopolitical concerns, and can be considered to be ad-hoc, reactive, and overwhelmingly defined by the United States’ encroachment into the Central Asian region, alongside developments occurring in neighbouring Afghanistan.

Chapter Six: Iran and Tajikistan 2005-2013 - Ahmadinejad and Foreign Policy Dysfunction

This chapter examines Iran and Tajikistan’s relations throughout the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013). This chapter notes that Ahmadinejad devoted significant attention to establishing relations with Tajikistan, which went well beyond the
efforts of his predecessors. Tajikistan, according to Ahmadinejad, was a “strategic partner”, and in fact Iran and Tajikistan’s “common history and culture” made them inseparable. Backing this rhetorical flourish, Ahmadinejad made a special effort to ensure that Tajikistan would play a critical part in his broader regional foreign policy approach. Iran during this period expended significant political, cultural, and economic capital in Tajikistan.

However, despite the public amity that existed between the two states, and the considerable efforts made by Iran during this period, this chapter argues that strong and substantive Iran-Tajik relations were not achieved by the close of Ahmadinejad's presidency. This was due in part to a dysfunctional Iranian foreign policy approach, which often led to the mismanagement of this inter-state relationship. This factor, along with the unwillingness of Tajik elites to go from words to deeds, and the broader impact of sanctions, international isolation, and regional rivalry, meant that Iran was largely unable to fulfil its prominent political and economic objectives in Tajikistan.

Conclusion:

Finally, the conclusion summarises the key themes and evaluates the findings of the research and suggests possible directions for future research.

Literature on Iranian-Tajik Relations

The scholarly literature relating to Iran’s foreign policy in Tajikistan, as already noted, is limited. Overwhelmingly, the existing literature focuses on Iran’s relations with Tajikistan in the broader context of the Central Asian region, or examines a very limited

time frame or issue area. Furthermore, in recent years interest in examining the influence of Iran in Tajikistan and Central Asia has faded considerably. At the outset of the collapse of the Soviet Union, numerous journalists and academics predicted that Iran would become a key player in the Central Asian region. Many accounts breathlessly predicted that the Central Asian republics, most notably Tajikistan, would become heavily influenced by Iran as it attempted to spread its Islamic revolutionary ideology. In forwarding such arguments, many authors were of the opinion that in the vacuum left by Soviet rule, only two choices awaited Tajikistan and the other Central Asian republics: Either they would join the Western camp through the establishment of close relations with Turkey, or would seek inspiration in Iran’s revolution and eventually morph into Islamic republics themselves.

According to a number of these accounts, Tajikistan, as a Persian-speaking state, would be a natural candidate to fall under Iran’s revolutionary sway. Such predictions seemed

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to bear fruit when Tajikistan fell into a messy civil war between 1992 and 1997. The influence of Islamic groups such as the IRP, and the presence of Iranian revolutionary slogans in the early parts of the conflict, were viewed as undeniable proof that Tajikistan would be the next site for Iran’s apparent Islamic expansionist agendas. However, following the failure of Islamic opposition forces to take control of the Tajik state, the imposition of secularist government under former Communist Emomali Rahmon, alongside the unwillingness or inability of Iran to spread its apparently nefarious ideologies in Tajikistan, it seems that many regional observers and academics lost interest in attempting to uncover Iran’s influence in Tajikistan. This state of affairs was further solidified following the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, when studies of Iran’s bilateral relations with Tajikistan took a backseat to analyses which focused upon Iran’s problematic relations with the US in the context of Central Asia, or Iran’s relations with, and influence in, neighbouring Afghanistan.

Despite, the dearth of literature relating to Iran’s relations with Tajikistan, scholars Mohiaddin Mesbahi and Kirill Nourzhanov have provided accounts which offer useful and instructive directions in the study of this topic. Mesbahi, in particular, has published a number of journal articles and book chapters on Iranian foreign policy in Tajikistan.

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However, his accounts have usually revolved solely around the role ideational factors have played in shaping Iran’s relations with Tajikistan. In providing such accounts, Mesbahi has argued that Islam and Persian culture, as the major elements of Iran’s national identity, have influenced the course of its relations with Tajikistan. Mesbahi notes that Iran’s cultural affinities, in the form of a common language and Persian cultural milieu, have ensured that a special bond exists between the two countries. However, these bonds are tempered by the presence of Iran’s Shi’ite revolutionary ideology, which has overwhelmingly acted as an obstacle in the way of Iran’s efforts to become an influential actor in Tajikistan. Mesbahi highlights that there is broad negativity towards Iran’s Islamic revolutionary identity among Tajikistan’s staunchly secularist political elite. In particular, Mesbahi argues that the spectre of Iran’s influence is often used by Tajik elites to gain support from Iran’s major international rival, the United States, and to legitimise intermittent crackdowns on Islamic opposition groups, who are often accused of receiving support from Tehran. Mesbahi’s accounts of Iran’s relations with Tajikistan, while highly informative and extremely well-researched, capture only a limited timeframe of Iranian-Tajik bilateral relations. Mesbahi’s work mainly focuses upon the period of the Tajik Civil War, and he has rarely sought to touch upon the development of Iranian-Tajik relations throughout the less exciting, but equally important, post-Civil War period, where it appears that ties between the two states have evolved considerably. It should also be noted that this work, while considerably indebted to Mesbahi’s accounts of Iran’s relations with Tajikistan, particularly during the civil war period, differs in its focus upon the “material factors” that have shaped ties between the two countries. Mesbahi’s work has the tendency to over-emphasise the role Islam and culture have in shaping relations between the two states, and neglects the arguably equally important economic and strategic drivers of this relationship.

A much more up-to-date account, which focuses less on the “ideational” and more on the “material” motivations which have shaped bilateral Iranian-Tajik relations is that offered by Nourzhanov.10 Nourzhanov notes that throughout the 1990s, Iran rarely found much

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favour among Tajiks. However he argues that following the national reconciliation process, which brought an end to the civil war in Tajikistan in 1997, perceptions towards Iran have gradually become much more positive. Iran’s friendly behaviour towards Tajikistan, and Tehran’s support for Dushanbe in overcoming a range of security threats in the post-civil war period, has led to greater political and strategic alignment between the two states. In forwarding this argument, Nourzhanov focuses on the discourses employed by Tajik security and political elites, or so-called “security intellectuals”, to frame relations between the two countries. Nourzhanov does not dismiss the presence of shared cultural and linguistic traits, which indeed influence relations between Iran and Tajikistan, however he argues that realistic and pragmatic concerns are the principle defining factors that shape this bilateral relationship—a conclusion with which this thesis strongly agrees. Nevertheless, this thesis departs from Nourzhanov’s work in its efforts to provide an account which gives the “Iranian side of the story”. Nourzhanov’s account almost solely focuses on the motivations which shape the decisions of Tajik political elites or “security intellectuals”. Furthermore, although this thesis agrees with Nourzhanov that the main motivating factors behind the Iranian-Tajik relationship are based in the realm of material and pragmatic concerns, it does not agree with Nourzhanov’s view that a strategic relationship is developing between the two countries. Rather, the thesis contends that the rhetoric employed by political elites in both countries does not adequately reflect the underdeveloped level of relations that exist between the two countries.

Both Mesbahi and Nourzhanov’s accounts provide strong analyses on important, albeit very limited, aspects and timeframes of Iran and Tajikistan’s bilateral relations, to which this thesis is considerably indebted. This thesis seeks to build on the work provided by both of these authors, but examines the Iranian-Tajik relationship on a much broader scale and comes to different conclusions, particularly in regards to the role of Islam in this bilateral relationship, and the presence and trajectory of strategic ties between the two countries.

**Methodology**

This thesis relies almost solely on a qualitative approach to examine the development of Iranian-Tajik relations. The inability to gain access to primary documentation issued by the Iranian and Tajik Governments has ensured that this thesis has relied considerably
upon literature produced by Western, Iranian, and Tajik think tanks, research schools, and non-government organisations. Furthermore, a wide set of journalistic and academic sources in both the Persian and English languages were also consulted.

In addition to these aforementioned secondary sources, a key component of the thesis is comprised of data gleaned from interviews conducted with former and current government officials of both the Iranian and Tajik Foreign Ministries, the Iranian Trade Promotion Office, Members of the Iranian Parliament, various Iranian and Tajik university faculty members, members of Iranian and Tajik think tanks and research centres, as well as individuals informally associated with both governments with knowledge of various aspects of this bilateral relationship.

All interviews were conducted in person by the researcher, from January to May 2013, in Tehran, Mashhad, and Dushanbe. The interviews themselves were semi-structured, centring on the core themes of the research, and were catered to the relative experiences and knowledge of the interviewees. When consent was given, these interviews were recorded by the researcher to enhance the accuracy of their accounts. When consent was not given, interviews were either documented with hand-written notes or, if requested, not documented at all. The majority of these interviews were recorded with the approval of the participants. However, due to sensitivity towards the domestic political situation in both countries, all of those who took part in the interviews were given the option to remain anonymous, and to have no attribution of their remarks in this thesis, or to be clearly identified and have their answers attributed. This approach was adopted to increase the likelihood that individuals concerned about speaking candidly would participate in the research. Finally, all interviewee participation was entirely voluntary and no interviewees were paid by the researcher.

There were limitations in the interview process. In particular, the ability to gain access to high-level officials in both countries was extremely difficult. The researcher was able to interview and hold discussions with a number of former mid and high-level officials who had intimate knowledge of bilateral relations between Iran and Tajikistan. However, high-level officials in office at the time of the fieldwork research were largely unwilling to speak to the researcher due to security concerns, or work constraints. Therefore, the researcher was forced to rely upon lower-level officials, or those outside of governmental
structures, to gain a better understanding of the most recent developments taking place within Iranian-Tajik bilateral relations. However, the profile of those interviewed should not be seen as an indicator of the experience level and knowledge of the interviewees. Many of those who had a lower profile or informal associations with the Iranian and Tajik Governments often had an equal or much better knowledge of this research topic than their superiors.

**Theoretical Framework**

A range of theories, approaches, and perspectives can be applied to the study of Iranian foreign policy, with the field of international relations known for both its theoretical diversity and analytical eclecticism. Although this is the case, in analysing the dynamics of Iranian-Tajik relations this thesis will not take an overly theoretical approach, nor will it attempt to use this topic as a case study to validate, or debunk, any particular paradigm or theoretical model. As already noted, this thesis provides an exploration of Iranian-Tajik relations, and is the first comprehensive analysis of this topic conducted within the English language scholarly literature. Therefore, in the researcher’s opinion, by adhering slavishly to a single theoretical approach or paradigm will only lead to an over-simplified explanation of what is a multifarious and highly complex bilateral relationship. Nevertheless, the researcher is also mindful that without providing some kind of framework or theoretical scope of analysis, the thesis will lack the parsimony necessary to provide clear insights into Iranian-Tajik relations.

With these concerns in mind, this thesis will apply insights and methods used in the neoclassical realist approach to international relations. The benefit of applying this approach is that it can be used in a very loose and pragmatic fashion to better explain various aspects of international relations and foreign policy. Although neoclassical realism lacks the parsimony offered by approaches such as structural realism, it sufficiently overcomes this shortfall in its analytical utility. Neoclassical realism provides the ability to not only study how the international structure of politics shapes the actions of states, but also allows scope to understand how ideational factors such as identity and elite perceptions—emerging at the complex and often messy domestic level of politics—have in influencing foreign policy conduct.
Neoclassical realism emerged during the 1990s in response to structural realism’s inability to explain the foreign policy conduct of states, or account for major historical events and shifts in the systemic structure of international politics. In particular, the failure of structural realism to explain the end of the Cold War encouraged a number of realist scholars to search for a theoretical approach that could take into account the influence of the international structure of politics, while also retaining the analytical and descriptive richness of earlier classical realist accounts that had largely been disregarded by the rush of scholars who sought to provide purely systemic accounts of international relations. A range of realist scholars such as Schweller, Zakaria, Lobell, Dueck, and Wohlfforth combined structural realist explanations with domestic-level intervening variables, such as state elite perceptions, intra-national institutional conflict, identity, and the extractive abilities of the state to form what Beach characterised as “Lego-like” theoretical models, which were both parsimonious and theoretically consistent.

The emphasis upon what Schweller termed the “peculiar domestic structures and political situations” of states marked a significant departure from Waltzian structural orthodoxy, which viewed realism as a purely systemic theory that was hostile to domestic

15 Steven E. Lobell, “Threat Assessment, the State, and Foreign Policy: A Neoclassical Realist Model,” in *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy*, eds. Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 42-75.
18 Beach, *Analyzing Foreign Policy*, 64.
This attention to the interactions between system-level and domestic-level political factors provided greater explanatory power than its classical and structural realist forebears. The need to account for domestic processes and internal characteristics of a state allowed neoclassical realists to “explain variation in the foreign policies of the same state over time or across different states facing similar external constraints”, without reducing explanations of international politics and a state’s external actions simply to its internal characteristics. Rather, internal characteristics are viewed as a guide only to national responses to international pressures. They are not a sole contributing or explanatory factor of state conduct. This was summed up explicitly by Rose, who contended that there was “no immediate or perfect transmission belt linking material capabilities to foreign policy behaviour. Foreign policy choices are made by actual political leaders and elites, and so it is their perceptions of relative power that matter, not simply relative quantities of physical resources or forces in being.” In essence, pressures, constraints, and opportunities proffered by the international system are translated and defined by the political processes that take place within the state, which play the role of channelling, mediating, and redirecting policy outputs in response to such systemic forces. Therefore, while domestic dynamics are important in shaping a state’s foreign policy, the anarchical system is the ultimate arbiter of its conduct, providing a state with both opportunities and constraints.

In analysing the role of internal characteristics and their influence in shaping state actions towards systemic opportunities and constraints, neoclassical realists seek to understand


22 Ibid, 22.


the strength and structure of a state relative to its society. The state, according to Taliaferro, Lobell, and Ripsman, is “epitomised by a national security executive, comprised of the head of government and the ministers and officials charged with making foreign security policy”. The executive sits at the ‘juncture’ of the state and the international system, and has access to privileged information from the state’s various security, political, and military apparatuses, and “is best equipped to perceive systemic constraints and deduce the national interest”. Depending on the structure of the state under study, the executive can act largely autonomously from society. However, depending on the context of the domestic political arrangements, the executive must negotiate and bargain with a range of domestic actors including, but not limited to, the legislature, political parties, opposition groups, economic sectors, and the public to define and achieve the state’s national interests. Therefore the process of conducting foreign policy and reacting to the exigencies of the international environment is considerably difficult due to this bargaining process. The state in the neoclassical realist conception does not necessarily function as a unitary actor. This view diverges considerably from structural realism, which views the state as a unitary actor that is largely able to assess challenges and opportunities in the international environment in an efficient, objective manner, autonomous from domestic society.

Neoclassical realism should not be conceived as little more than an attempt to “smuggle in” domestic-level variables into a structural realist framework. Instead, neoclassical realism offers a distinct methodological perspective, which argues that theorists must take better account of the causal chain that links material power and systemic influences to foreign policy behaviour. The core realist insight that systemic forces and material power shape and influence foreign policy behaviour should not be ignored, and by no

27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid, 21.
30 Rose, “Neoclassical Realism,” 165.
means does neoclassical realism ignore the importance of these factors. As noted by Rose, “people who ignore this basic insight will often waste their time looking at variables that are actually epiphenomenon. Yet people who cannot move beyond the system will have difficulty explaining most of what happens in international relations.”

In essence the structure, or system of international politics—or as Waltz describes it “the third image”—lays the basic foundation and building blocks of the neoclassical realist approach. However, neoclassical realism also attempts to take into account the “first and second images”, namely the individual and domestic level of politics. Without taking into account these two images it is very difficult, even impossible, to understand the factors that determine foreign policy choices and behaviour.

As is the case with structural realism, neoclassical realism views a state’s relative position within the international system as the independent variable. Furthermore, neoclassical realists agree with the structural realist assumption that anarchy is epitomised by uncertainty and threats, with a lack of guidance as to how to respond to such factors. These characteristics render anarchy as a self-help environment. However, neoclassical realists disagree with the structural realist assumption that state action is directly impacted by systemic pressures. Instead, state elites have significant difficulty in interpreting how to react to systemic pressures, and will not automatically respond in the most efficient and effective manner, with considerable delays and missteps being a characteristic of state behaviour.

This inability to react in an efficient and effective manner is due to a range of intervening domestic-level variables, “which channel, mediate and (re)direct systemic pressures”. As outlined by Juneau, structural realism’s “assumption that a black-box corresponding

31 Ibid.
32 Ibid, 166.
35 Schweller, “Unanswered Threats,” 164.
to “the state” can correctly assess the distribution of power and directly translate it into policy is problematic.” While a range of domestic influences can be chosen to act as intervening variables within the neoclassical realist approach, this thesis seeks to focus primarily upon two domestic influences it considers to be particularly salient in Iran’s foreign policy towards Tajikistan in the post-Cold War systemic environment. These two domestic factors are elite perceptions and national identity.

Elite perceptions are indeed critical in shaping how Iran, and for that matter all states, conduct foreign policy. Foreign policy choices are made by real people, occupying real positions, and should not be underestimated or disregarded. Zakaria contends that “statesmen, not states, are the primary actors in international affairs” and it is their “perceptions, not objective measurements that truly matter”. In such a view, neoclassical realists argue that the international distribution of power shapes the foreign policy of states, however, it is how governing elites perceive and calculate this distribution of power that truly determines and defines a state’s foreign policy. If indeed the structure of the international system and power distributions within this system influence the conduct of international politics, then they “must do so largely through perceptions of the people who make decision on behalf of states”. How a state reacts through foreign policy conduct to the opportunities and constraints proffered by the international system can be completely unrelated to the “actual reality” of this system, and more to do with the perceptions of those in charge of a state’s foreign policy conduct.

The second intervening variable for this study is the concept of national identity. Identity plays a crucial role in shaping how a state views itself and others, thus defining its interests and foreign policy preferences. States do not simply decide on what they want through material calculations. Rather, a state’s conduct is considerably influenced by how

37 Zakaria, From Wealth to Power, 42.
38 Wohlforth, The Elusive Balance, 2.
state elites conceive of their state’s identity, and how elites view other states within the international system. Identities formed within the domestic milieu of the state provide signposts for elite action, shaping how elites think they should act, and what strategies they can actually entertain in the pursuit of foreign policy.\textsuperscript{40}

In applying the neoclassical realist approach to the study of Iran’s relations with Tajikistan, this thesis aims to provide a multi-layered account that links the domestic environment of Iranian politics to the structure of the regional and international system. Therefore, the domestic imperatives and motivations—both ideational and material—of Iran’s foreign policy elites, and the institutional structure of foreign policy-making, will be examined alongside and in conjunction with the opportunities, constraints, power balances, and dynamics of the international political system within which Iran and Tajikistan interact.

\textsuperscript{40} Christian Reus-Smit, “Constructivism” in \textit{Theories of International Relations}, ed. Scott Burchill et al. (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 198
Chapter One: The Islamic Republic of Iran: The Domestic Context

It is difficult to fully understand the foreign policy of a state without taking into account its domestic environment and circumstances. The domestic societal, economic, and political context of a state greatly determines what a state can conceive and achieve in the international arena. As highlighted by Fearon, domestic politics matter in the sense that they cause a state to pursue “suboptimal foreign policies”, and differences in a state’s “political institutions, cultures, economic structures, and leadership goals” have the potential to cause a state to pursue differing foreign policy choices, which are completely unrelated to the systemic environment or the concept of relative power.¹ This chapter seeks to provide a broad overview of some of the more salient elements of Iran’s domestic environment, which influence its foreign policy agendas. Although much of Iran’s rich and complex domestic situation cannot be covered in this chapter, a number of variables have been selected to provide a better grasp on how Iran’s internal characteristics impact its external actions and agendas. This chapter will firstly outline Iran’s geographical situation and resource base, describing the vulnerabilities, opportunities, and unchangeable material realities that face Iranian policy elites in the making of foreign policy. Secondly, a description of Iran’s national identity is provided, examining the role nationalism and Islam play in informing Iran’s foreign policies and the worldviews of its elites. Thirdly, a broad overview of Iran’s byzantine political system is provided. Finally, this chapter examines the key institutions and figures that influence and implement foreign policy in the Islamic Republic.

1.1 Geographical Situation and Resource Base

Situated between the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf, and straddling the European, Turkic, Arab and Indian worlds, Iran effectively sits at a strategic crossroads. Acting as a link between two continents and a vital gateway to the Indian Ocean, the ability to control

Iran has historically meant the ability to dictate the flow of cross-continental trade and communication between Europe and Asia. This geographical importance is only enhanced by Iran’s rich hydrocarbon resources.\(^2\) Control over hydrocarbons is a key factor in the distribution of global power, wherein whoever controls such resources can exponentially increase their share of that power, and consequentially weaken the power of rival states by depriving access to this vital resource.\(^3\) Although Iran’s abundance of oil and gas has given it considerable economic and political clout in international affairs, its domestic economic, military, and technological limitations have often made it the target of larger, much more powerful states.\(^4\) Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States have all at different periods throughout the twentieth century attempted to control Iran’s vast hydrocarbon resources and take advantage of its material vulnerabilities in the hope of improving their national power and strategic positions. International rivalry stemming from Iran’s hydrocarbon resource endowment, the continuing and growing reliance of the world’s economy on these resources, and Iran’s technological, economic, and military deficiencies has therefore shaped Iran’s foreign and domestic policy options and placed both Iran’s pre and post-revolutionary political elites in a repetitive, and at times, perilous political bind.\(^5\)

In the face of consistent interference in its domestic affairs, Iranian political elites have entered into a series of alliances with rival great and extra-regional powers in an effort to extract benefits from the consistent international rivalry over their state’s strategic position and resources. However, from the Franco-Persian Agreement signed between

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\(^4\) Shireen Hunter, Iran’s Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era: Resisting the New International Order (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010), 20.

\(^5\) Ibid.
Napoleon and Fath Ali Shah in 1807, to Iran’s close military and economic relationship with the United States during the Cold War, such alliances have usually ended with Iran entering into a relationship of dependence, having its territorial and political interests overlooked, or becoming little more than a pawn in larger political games. In the face of these traumatic, Machiavellian experiences, Iranian political leaders of all stripes, both pre and post-revolutionary, have held up the lofty dream of domestic economic, technological, and military self-sufficiency as the remedy to ensure Iranian political independence and freedom of action within international affairs.

The dream of gaining such independence and self-sufficiency seemed in the grasp of Iran during the 1960s. Iran was able to accumulate capital from its oil rents at a much faster rate than any time in its history. The oil price shocks of the 1970s dramatically sped up this process of capital accumulation, and fuelled Iran’s former leader Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi’s (1941-1979) ambition to transform Iran into a great power, with the economic, political, and military wherewithal to control its own destiny. In the drive towards independence and self-sufficiency, the Shah sought to expand Iran’s domestic economy, and to develop Iran’s manufacturing and industrial base through import substitution strategies. Throughout the 1970s, Iran’s economic and political position improved dramatically, which provided Iran with the capabilities to influence the region around it. The Shah was confident that the road to a “Great Civilisation” was upon Iran and that in a short period of time his country would be one of the top five global military and economic powers. However, rather than this road opening the way towards greater independence, it instead led the country towards increased economic and political stress.

6 See Evaleila Pesaran, _Iran's Struggle for Economic Independence: Reform and Counter-Reform in the Post-Revolutionary Era_ (Oxon: Routledge, 2011), 22-23.

7 Hunter, _Iran’s Foreign Policy_, 20.

8 See Amin Saikal, _The Rise and Fall of the Shah: Iran from Autocracy to Religious Rule_ (Princeton University Press, 2009), 103

and vulnerability. By relying so heavily upon oil rents to increase its technological and economic base, Iran opened itself to international economic pressures and shocks, which were beyond its control. In the words of Ehteshami and Hinnebusch this “increased the country’s dependence on the outside world and the key Western powers like the USA. In short, oil wealth had become both the salvation and the curse for the country’s modernising elites; its Achilles’ heel.”

Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, an event that was in no small part fuelled by popular domestic resentment towards Iran’s economic dependence and political subservience to outside powers, and its significant and worrying economic deficiencies, Iran’s Islamic revolutionaries attempted to recalibrate their country’s structure of alliances, and overwhelming reliance upon hydrocarbon rents. Although Iran’s post-revolutionary leaders displayed an almost identical interest as that of the Shah in obtaining an independent position for Iran within global affairs, their means of gaining such independence were radically different. The Shah viewed reliance on outside investment in Iran’s domestic economy, and development of Iran’s hydrocarbon wealth, as a necessary evil on the road to economic, and therefore political, independence. The revolutionaries, on the other hand, considered the breaking of Iran’s alliance with the “Great Satan”—the United States—and its reliance upon hydrocarbons as a necessary first step in achieving Iranian independence, and ensuring self-sufficiency. However, the entrenched structure of the global capitalist system, the Islamic regime’s emphasis upon spreading the values of Islam, its growing alienation of regional neighbours through

\[\text{\textsuperscript{10}}\text{Ibid.} \]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{11} This notion of self-sufficiency and independence is enshrined within Article 153 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which stipulates that any form of agreement resulting in foreign control over the natural resources, economy, army, or culture of the country, as well as other aspects of the national life, is forbidden. See "Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran." Iran Online, http://fisiran.org/en/resources/legaldoc/constitutionislamic, accessed March 3, 2015; and Pesaran, Iran's Struggle, 21.} \]
bellicose and violent rhetoric, and most importantly its long eight-year war with Iraq, stymied these goals.\textsuperscript{12}

The need to break free from international isolation, and attend to the needs of national reconstruction after the economically and politically devastating Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) again led to an overwhelming reliance upon hydrocarbon rents to sustain Iran’s economic and political future. While post-revolutionary Iran has been able to minimise the influence of outside forces in its domestic affairs, and has pursued a largely independent and non-aligned foreign policy, predicated upon spreading the word of Islam, and protecting and defending the “rights of all Muslims”.\textsuperscript{13} These goals could not be achieved without relying on the same resources that unravelled the Shah’s futuristic vision. In essence, Iran’s post-revolutionary leaders have been forced to read from the same playscript as that of the Shah, where “oil revenues are being used to spur economic growth and military strength”, which in turn have been continuously used to ensure Iran has a leading place in regional security affairs.\textsuperscript{14} This does not mean that there is no place for revolutionary ideology in Iran’s foreign policy approach. Rather, there is sober realisation among Iran’s elites that without the development and improvement of the country’s domestic vulnerabilities, meeting its ideological and strategic goals on the international level are impossible.\textsuperscript{15} Despite relatively large human, agricultural, and mineral resources, Iran continues to rely upon hydrocarbons as the legs to prop up its economy. Furthermore, its weak economic, technological, and military capacity has

\textsuperscript{12} For a further discussion on the devastating economic impact of the Iran-Iraq War, see K.L. Afrasiabi, \textit{After Khomeini: New Directions in Iran's Foreign Policy} (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 36-41.

\textsuperscript{13} Anoushiravan Ehteshami, "The Foreign Policy of Iran," in \textit{The Foreign Policies of Middle East States}, ed. Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami (Boulder: Lynne Reinner, 2002), 288. Within Article 152 of Iran’s Constitution it is clearly stipulated that the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is based upon ensuring the defence of the rights of all Muslims. Article 152 further states that Iran will follow a policy of non-alignment with respect to the hegemonic superpowers, and will maintain peaceful relations with all ‘non-belligerent’ states. See "Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran."

\textsuperscript{14} Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, \textit{Syria and Iran}, 37.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
ensured that Iran’s foreign policy options are indeed limited, and not of the scope its elites wished for upon the eve of revolution.\textsuperscript{16}

1.2 National Identity

National identity has been an ever-present and critical theme throughout Iran’s modern political history, having had a significant impact upon Iran’s political behaviour and elite conceptualisations of foreign policy interests. Iranian elites have engaged in at times violent struggles over conceptions of Iran’s national identity, with a particular point of conflict stemming from which element of Iranian national identity—Iranian or Islamic—should take precedence.\textsuperscript{17} These dual, but not necessarily mutually exclusive, elements of Iran’s national identity have become key points of political, cultural, and social friction within Iran, friction which Hunter argues has had “significant socio-political consequences whose legacy is bedevilling Iran today and is deeply affecting the self-perception and worldview of important segments of its people and polity”.\textsuperscript{18} The importance of understanding these two important facets of Iran’s national identity cannot be understated; for instance, Iran’s political and societal elites, who view their country’s national identity mainly through the prism of Iranian nationalism, generally tend to favour an approach to foreign policy that privileges Iran’s so-called “pragmatic” national interests. The opposite holds true for those who identify strongly with Iran’s Islamic identity, in which case Iran’s foreign policy becomes orientated towards fulfilling Islamic and trans-national interests, with strictly national interests taking a backseat.\textsuperscript{19} The following two sections will briefly outline these two important elements of Iran’s national identity.

\textsuperscript{16} Pesaran, \textit{Iran's Struggle}, 59.

\textsuperscript{17} Suzanne Maloney, "Identity and Change in Iran's Foreign Policy," in \textit{Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East}, ed. Shibley Telhami and Michael Barnett (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 94.

\textsuperscript{18} Hunter, \textit{Iran's Foreign Policy}, 18.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
identity, placing them in historical context, and displaying how they have impacted Iran’s political trajectory and approaches to foreign policy in recent history.

**Iranian Nationalism**

Nationalism must be considered a crucial element in the creation and binding together of a unitary Iranian state in the early twentieth century. While Iran’s history spans thousands of years, modern Iranian nationalism emerged in much more recent times. Similar to processes which occurred in other developing societies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, modern nationalism in Iran had its genesis in internal disorder and chaos, and consistent military and political defeats at the hands of European powers. 20 This devastating and embarrassing process brought to the fore considerable soul-searching and debate within Iran’s ruling and elite circles. 21 In particular, Iran’s political vulnerability and social decay inspired growing reformist tendencies among segments of Iran’s intelligentsia, and provided a fertile breeding ground for European modernist ideas such as nationalism. 22 In attempting to understand why Iran was so vulnerable internationally, and so chaotic and disordered domestically, nineteenth century intellectuals placed the blame squarely upon the shoulders of Iran’s traditional Islamic religion and customs, which in their eyes had facilitated and encouraged Iran’s backwardness and lack of modern social and political development. 23 In criticising Islam, these intellectuals found succour in Iran’s vast corpus of centuries old legends, myths, and writings, which glorified past Iranian civilisational triumphs. For instance, Mirza Fath Ali Akhunzadeh

20 For an in-depth analysis of the roots of Iranian modern nationalism, see Hamish Alan McGregor, "Nationalism in the Islamic Republic of Iran 1979-2007" (PhD Diss., The Australian National University 2009), 55-87.


23 Ibid.
(1812-1878), a prominent thinker and literary critic, promoted a narrative of Iranian history which privileged Iran’s pre-Islamic past. According to Akhunzadeh, Iran had been a great culture and civilisation until the seventh century Arab invasions. However, following the introduction of the Islamic faith and Arab cultural moors, Iran had decayed and become a shadow of its once powerful self. Pre-Islamic Iran was a period of power, justice and progress, whereas Islamic Iran was characterised by the imposition of a foreign culture and religion in the form of “Arab” religion of Islam, which had effectively strangled Iran’s indigenous culture and innate progressiveness. Iran’s intelligentsia assembled a narrative in which the peoples of Iran were a self-conscious collectivity for millennia that were considerably distinct from their Arab neighbours and, according to McGregor, were imbued with “the same progressive tendencies as Western civilization ranging from a talent for technical invention through to supposed interest in the foundations of constitutional politics”. In the eyes of prominent segments of Iran’s elites, their country had to return to its much more authentic non-Islamic, and European-like, civilised past, and disassociate itself from the Arab Islamic culture if it was to again become a progressive, powerful modern state.

These ideas of reclaiming Iran’s glorious past in the service of its future were mainly restricted to the upper echelons of Iran’s secular intelligentsia. However, following the 1925 overthrow of Ahmed Shah Qajar (1909-1925)—a figure many within Iran’s intelligentsia believed strongly symbolised Iran’s backwardness—this nationalist narrative became the foundational element for the modernisation and consolidation of the


26 According to McGregor, Iranian nationalism was heavily influenced by Western Orientalist discourse, and individuals such as Akhunzadeh directly imitated European popular conceptualisations of Iranian history. See ibid., 71.

27 Ibid., 76.
Iranian state. Under both Reza Khan, later Reza Shah Pahlavi (1925-1941), and his son Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, this nationalist discourse thrived, and both monarchs, enamoured by the myths of Iran’s pre-Islamic past, appropriated the achievements and symbols of this period as a means to legitimate their monarchical rule and solidify, centralise, and develop Iranian state and society. In particular, Muhammad Reza Shah became an almost obsessive proponent of linking his dynasty and Iran’s political present with its pre-Islamic past, and characterised Iran’s economic and political development and modernisation with the revival of a new Persian empire, which he hoped would eventually see Iran become one of the most technologically and economically-developed countries in the world, and the region’s dominant military power. In forwarding such elements of Iran’s past, the Shah consistently rejected Islam as a critical component of Iranian political, social, and cultural life, and believed that Islam was not conducive to his interpretation of Iranian values, history, and customs. The Shah instead sought to instigate a range of secularist reform agendas, and applied a range of pre-Islamic national symbols to legitimise his lofty and at times overly-ambitious plans.

In the realm of foreign policy, the Shah sought to reassert Iran’s “former place” in the region and the world. The Shah’s foreign policies were in many respects motivated by a misguided and chauvinistic reading of Iran’s pre-Islamic past, whereby he almost

29 Maloney, "Identity and Change," 96.
obsessively focused upon past Persian military dominance and imperial grandeur. Driven by the Shah’s ambitions, Iran throughout the 1960s and 1970s engaged in a series of aggressive and provocative acts against its Arab neighbours, which included Iranian military forces occupying three small Persian Gulf islands claimed by the United Arab Emirates, the engagement in a number of small-scale battles with Iraqi forces, and the deployment of troops to crush an armed insurgency in Oman. These actions, according to Maloney, were driven by the Shah’s yearning “to put Iran into a preeminent position in the region”, and reassert Iranian dominance throughout the Middle East.

**Islam**

The Shah’s efforts to reassert Iranian dominance throughout the Middle East, and more controversially his efforts to marginalise the role of Islam within Iranian society, were deeply confronting to many Iranians. As noted aptly by Ansari, although the Shah emphasised the splendours of Iran’s ancient pre-Islamic Aryan past, many of his subjects disagreed, arguing that Iranian civilisation was in fact being denigrated by a wilful ignorance of Islam and subservience to the West. This omission had to be addressed, and in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution, Islamic Iran was emphasised at the expense of pre-Islamic Iran.

The eventual establishment of a theocratic government following the overthrow of the Shah irrefutably shifted the relationship between Islam and Iran’s national identity. The Shah’s emphasis upon reinvigorating Iran’s imperial past and promoting Iran’s cultural superiority at the expense of Islam was considered anathema to Ayatollah Ruhollah

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34 Maloney, "Identity and Change," 96

35 Ibid.

Khomeini and his Islamic revolutionary cadres.\textsuperscript{37} Khomeini initially set out to abolish the Iranian nationalist elements, which had become strongly entrenched within Iranian state and society following more than 50 years of Pahlavi rule. Khomeini derided the glorification of nationalism, considering it to be a man-made imposition incompatible with the religion of Islam, and an affront to the inherent equality and unity of Muslims throughout the world.\textsuperscript{38} In Khomeini’s view, Islamic precepts had to guide the policies of Muslim states, not narrow national territorial interests. By pursuing national interests, Iran and the world’s other Muslim states had allowed divisions to develop between what he believed was a united world community of Islamic followers.

In the post-revolutionary Islamist project, no longer would Iran’s identity be built upon the “pagan darkness” of pre-Islamic times, nor by the “despotical” monarchical Persian empires so revered by the Shah and the secularist elite; rather it was the spirit of Islam, the infallibility of the Qur’an, the feats of Muhammad the Prophet, and the sacrifice of Shi’ite martyrs which would now inform Iran’s identity and place in the world. In line with this vision, Khomeini set out to Islamise Iranian state and society, and attempted to completely reorientate Iran’s foreign policy practices, interests, and behaviours, which became based upon defending the “rights of all Muslims”.\textsuperscript{39} Khomeini saw post-revolutionary Iran as the vanguard of what would eventually be a global Islamic movement that would liberate the world’s Muslims from oppressive rule and transform the international political order.\textsuperscript{40} Hunter believes that Khomeini’s worldview, which had a deep impact upon Iran’s national identity and foreign policy, was deeply polarised:

\begin{quote}
[Khomeini] saw all things in terms of a battle between truth and righteousness and falsehood (Haq va Bala) between the arrogant powers (Mustakberin) and the downtrodden nations (Mustazefin). He also saw Iran as the standard bearer for and
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{37} Clark, "Iranian Foreign Policy," 75.


\textsuperscript{39} Clark, "Iranian Foreign Policy," 75.

\textsuperscript{40} Zubaida, "Islam and Nationalism," 416.
champion of all deprived nations and not only Muslims. This was so because, according to him, Iran’s Islamic system was the only one based on true Islam.\footnote{Hunter, \textit{Iran's Foreign Policy}, 27.}

Khomeini’s simplistic views were followed with vigorous intent by early Iranian governments, adding a new, and at times radical, ideational layer on top of Iran’s foreign policy agendas.\footnote{Brenton Clark, "Persian Identity and Iranian Foreign Policy Towards Tajikistan and Afghanistan During the Ahmadinejad Presidency: A Constructivist Analysis," (Honours Thesis, James Cook University, 2011), 40.} Under the auspices of “exporting the Islamic Revolution”, Iran attempted to spread its message and its decidedly Islamic identity beyond its borders, destabilising its “un-Islamic”, and Sunni majority regional neighbours.\footnote{Ramazani, “Ideology and Pragmatism in Iran's Foreign Policy,” 555.} Iran’s leaders saw their revolution and its Islamic ideals as universal and above cultural and sectarian divisions, however the discourse that informed Iran’s Islamic identity was couched in decidedly Shi’a sectarian terms, which was deeply confronting to Iran’s mainly Sunni Arab neighbours. This impacted the ability to spread Iran’s Islamic, yet Shi’ite revolution, beyond its borders, with only a small number of mainly like-minded co-sectarians, such as Lebanese Hezbollah, attracted to Iran’s Islamic message. Furthermore, Iran’s efforts to destabilise its neighbours, which saw it implicated in a coup attempt against the government of Bahrain in 1981, and its efforts to encourage Shi’a minorities to rise up against their Sunni, Western-backed leaders, created a deep sense of unease and suspicion throughout the region and the world, and saw Iran labelled as a rogue state. This unease, coupled with Iran’s brutal eight-year long war with Iraq, had the effect of isolating Iran from regional and global politics.\footnote{David E. Thaler et al., \textit{Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics} (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2010), 14-15.}

This isolation and the inability to spread the Islamic Revolution beyond its borders saw a gradual weakening of the Islamic-inspired aspects of Iran’s national identity, but at the same time led to a reassertion and reinvigoration of the nationalist aspects that Khomeini
sought so strongly to cast aside in the early days of the revolution. The ability to completely reorientate the symbols of Iranian state and society was impossible. The inability to spread its Islamic, albeit Shi’a, message, and the need to muster domestic support for the war against Iraq, saw Iran’s leaders frame their political discourse again in nationalist terms, a process which only increased following the death of Khomeini in 1989.\textsuperscript{45} While the Shah attempted to nullify and silence the Islamic character of Iranian society, Iran’s Islamic elites since Khomeini’s death have on the other hand displayed a keen awareness that both sides of Iran’s identity must be fostered and employed within both domestic and foreign policy.\textsuperscript{46} From President Muhammad Khatami’s efforts to strike a balance between “Iranian-ness” and “Muslim-ness” in domestic policies,\textsuperscript{47} to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s hankering to populist and nationalist Persian rhetoric,\textsuperscript{48} it is clear that one cannot describe Iranian national identity without also taking into account its Islamic and nationalist elements, both of which are used in the process of legitimating a range of both domestic and foreign policies.

1.3 The Islamic Republic Political System

The Islamic Revolution of 1979, while solidifying Iran’s long history of authoritarianism, did institute a unique form of rule, which has no precursor or current counterpart in world politics. The Islamic Republic of Iran is unique within state governing systems due to its combination of a semi-theocratic system of rule based upon the velayat-e-faqih (Rule of the Jurisprudence), institutionalised in the 1979 Constitution. This system of rule moulds

\textsuperscript{45} For instance, Iran’s post-revolutionary leaders resorted to moulding nationalist slogans with religious ones, such as extolling young men to become ‘martyrs’ to the Holy Fatherland. See Ansari, “Civilisational Identity and Foreign Policy: The Case of Iran,” 249.


\textsuperscript{47} For further discussion, see Shabnam Holliday, ”The Politicisation of Culture and the Contestation of Iranian National Identity in Khatami’s Iran,” Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism 7, no. 1 (2007): 27-44.

\textsuperscript{48} See Ali M. Ansari, ”Iranian Nationalism Rediscovered.” Middle East Institute http://www.mei.edu/content/iranian-nationalism-rediscovered, accessed August 1, 2015.
both theocratic elements, which find their basis in Islamic texts, with elements of republicanism that have their antecedents in Western political thought and in the 1906 Iranian Constitutional Revolution. Both Rakel and Chehabi argue that Iran’s system of government is characterised by totalitarian, authoritarian, and democratic tendencies. However, Rakel and Chehabi both agree that Iran must be considered an authoritarian system. This is due to the fact that Iran has only a limited level of political pluralism, with feudal and patrimonial characteristics. Although Iran does have parliamentary and presidential elections, the Iranian electorate has only a limited choice of candidates who fit within the narrow ideological boundaries as set out by the ruling regime. The roots of this system lie in the ideas of Ayatollah Khomeini, who during the 1960s and 1970s sought to reinterpret the role of the Shi’a clergy within modern political and social life.

In traditional Shi’a thought, it is widely accepted that the political authority of the Imams was suspended following the occultation of the Twelfth Imam in the ninth century, and while the Imam’s authority and role as religious experts were passed on to Shi’a clerics, their political authority was not. Khomeini sought to overturn hundreds of years of


50 Khomeini was a senior member of the Usuli theological school of Shi’ism. Khomeini vehemently opposed the Akbari school, which argued that there was no need for interpretation of the hadith by clerics. Rather, lay believers could interpret the Qur’an, and the deeds of Muhammad the Prophet, without the intercession of clerics. Followers of the Usuli school such as Khomeini, on the other hand, insisted that the Qur’an was too complex to be understood by the vast majority of people. Only senior learned clerics could possibly understand the true and inner meanings of Islam. Effectively it was up to these learned clerics to interpret the hadith and disseminate such interpretations to the lay masses. The Usuli school over time became the dominant theological school of thought within Shi’ism, which paved the way for the development of an independent and hierarchical clergy, and coloured much of Khomeini’s view on governance and the role of Islam in society. See Ervand Abrahamian, Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic (London: I.B. Tauris & Co, 1993), 13-15; Rakel, Power, Islam, and Political Elite, 24-25.

mainstream Shi’a religious thought, and expand the authority of Shi’a clerics into the realms of politics and governance. According to Arjomand, Khomeini was the first Shi’ite jurist to open the discussion of “Islamic Government” in a work of jurisprudence, and he took the radical step of claiming that the Imam’s right to rule also devolved upon the jurists during the occultation of the Twelfth Imam.⁵²

Khomeini insisted that until the Twelfth Imam had returned to Earth, responsibility for governing the worldwide umma should be placed into the hands of a vali-e faqih (Jurisprudential Leader), who would have the same authority as Muhammad and the Imams.⁵³ In the words of Rizvi, Khomeini believed that any “matter, whether public or private, relating to anyone living in the Islamic world would come under the jurisdiction of the vali”.⁵⁴ In effect, the vali-e faqih would be the “guardian” and leader of the Islamic nation, a role Khomeini saw as no different from that of a guardian responsible for a child.

Following the overthrow of the Shah, Khomeini quickly sought to institutionalise his novel, yet radical theory of velayat-e-faqih (Rule of the Jurisprudent). However, in attempting to do so Khomeini faced stiff resistance from nationalist, liberalist, and secularist political opponents led by provisional Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan.⁵⁵ Bazargan and his allies believed Iran’s post-revolutionary political future lay in popular democracy rather than theocracy, and endeavoured to implement a constitution and system of governance based upon Charles de Gaulle’s Fifth Republic, which would

⁵² Arjomand, After Khomeini, 22.
⁵⁴ M. Mahtab Alam Rizvi, "Velayat-E-Faqih (Supreme Leader) and Iranian Foreign Policy: An Historical Analysis," Strategic Analysis 36, no. 1 (2012): 113.
⁵⁵ Bazargan was not the only opponent of Khomeini’s velayat-e faqih system. A number of prominent clerics such as Mohammad Kezem Shariatmadari had strong reservations about such a system of governance, and openly opposed Khomeini. In retaliation Khomeini effectively ‘demoted’ Shariatmadari—an unprecedented move within Shi’ism, and placed a number of his other clerical opponents under house arrest. See Arjomand, After Khomeini, 23.
enshrine “liberty, equality, and social justice”. Such ideas were considered repulsive by Khomeini and his followers, who were committed to ensuring the establishment of a theocracy at the expense of temporal and foreign ideals such as democracy. Although Khomeini and his followers were ultimately successful in ensuring that they got their way in establishing an Islamic government, the process of attempting to formulate a constitution, which would form the basis of Iran’s post-revolutionary political system, did entail making considerable concessions to the democratic ideals championed by his opponents. Furthermore, the ability to mould Khomeini’s unique theory of Islamic governance on top of a state that had undergone significant modernisation over the twentieth century, with a complex set of legal codes which were well established, was considerably more difficult than the Islamic revolutionaries had ever imagined. Turning Khomeini’s theory of velayat-e-faqih and the vast corpus of Shi’ite religious law into the law of a modern state required a complex process of codification, legislation and the expansion of activities well beyond matters of religious rituals and ethics. This process, and the political battles that ensued in the heady days of the revolution, ultimately bequeathed upon Iran a constitution and a system of government writhing with internal contradictions and ambiguities, which to this day remain largely unresolved.

Such contradictions are obvious in the Islamic Republic of Iran’s Constitution, which clearly displays in its 175 clauses the struggles that took place between Iran’s heterogeneous post-revolutionary elites, and the difficulty in establishing a modern system of government based solely upon religious laws and customs. As noted by Abrahamian, Iran’s Constitution is a hybrid

56 Abrahamian, A History of Modern Iran, 162.
57 Arjomand, After Khomeini, 26.
58 Ibid.
59 At the most basic level, the idea of establishing an Islamic theocracy based upon a constitution is itself a contradiction. Furthermore the notions and precepts within Iran’s Constitution, such as the ‘sovereignty of the people’, ‘republic’, ‘elections’, ‘parliament’, and ‘legislature’, are all foreign concepts to Islamic law, having their antecedents in Western thought, but are nonetheless enshrined within this
between Khomeini’s *velayat-e-faqeh* and Bazargan’s French Republic; between divine rights and the rights of man; between theocracy and democracy; between vox dei and vox populi; and between clerical authority and popular sovereignty.\(^{60}\)

Despite this hybridised and contradictory constitution, Khomeini and his followers ensured that populist and democratic notions such as “the sovereignty of the people” were sidelined and sacrificed on the pyre of Islam and Khomeini’s own personal political power agenda. The sacrifice of the popular will was neatly summed up by Ayatollah Mohammad Beheshti, a prominent figure in his own right, and a close member of Khomeini’s inner circle, who declared: “As the first slogan, ‘Islamic government’ was chosen, which was very good and expressive, and when it was decided that the regime would have a President, it was called the ‘Islamic Republic’, but the true and perfect name for this regime is the ‘regime of the umma and Imamate’ (*nezam-e ommat va emamat*).”\(^{61}\) Beheshti’s views are confirmed in the Constitution, whereby any notions of popular will took a back seat to Islamic precepts.\(^{61}\) This is strongly affirmed in the Constitution’s preamble, which states faith in God, Divine Justice, the Qur’an, Judgment Day, Muhammad the Prophet, and Shi’ite concepts such as the Twelve Imams, and the return of the Mahdi.\(^{62}\) Article Two of the Constitution declares that Iran’s political system is Islamic and based upon the notion that: “There is only one God … who is by right ruler and lawgiver, and man must submit to His command.” And in the world of temporal affairs, “The Imamate will provide the leadership and will play a fundamental role in the progress of the Islamic Revolution”.\(^{63}\) The republican elements of the Islamic Republic are marginalised by Article Four, which states that all “civil, penal, financial, economic,
administrative, cultural, military, political, and other laws and regulations must be based on Islamic criteria”. And it is the Supreme Leader and the Guardian Council of clerics who decides if these laws meet such criteria. Furthermore, the parliament and the president, both popularly-elected bodies are unable to make decisions without the support or approval of the Supreme Leader, and consultative clerical bodies such as the Guardian Council. For instance, the parliament was not seen by Khomeini as a body that had true legislative power, but was instead an institution that would be responsible for the development of programs for the implementation of Islamic laws. Therefore, according to Hunter, “the people’s representatives can only participate in setting programs or legislating on matters on which Islamic law is silent”. The Constitution therefore leaves open only a very narrow space for the Iranian electorate to participate in the formation of Iranian government policies and agendas. Power is effectively corralled in the hands of a small body of unelected clerical elites, namely the Guardian Council, and reigned over by the Supreme Leader who has power reminiscent of Il Duce.

The hybridised nature of the Iranian Constitution has had the effect of creating a series of institutions which effectively overlap, replicate roles, and conflict with each other in the policy formulation and implementation processes. These institutional arrangements have undermined the ability of any institution to gain too much power, and have effectively led to the “Balkanisation” of the Iranian state, whereby the multiple centres of power have created divisions that go well beyond traditional forms of checks and balances and lead

64 Hunter, Iran's Foreign Policy, 23.
65 The Guardian Council consists of 12 jurists (six clerical, six non-clerical). The six clerics are selected from among the clerical elite by the Supreme Leader. The six non-clerics are appointed by the parliament, as recommended by the head of the judiciary. The Guardian Council not only plays the role of ensuring Iranian laws comply with Sharia law, it also has oversight of the elections of the parliament, the Assembly of Experts, and the president, determining which candidates can sit on these three popularly-elected bodies. See Rakel, Power, Islam, and Political Elite, 34.
66 Hunter, Iran's Foreign Policy 23.
67 Ibid.
68 See Abrahamian, A History of Modern Iran, 165.
to friction, competition, and deadlock among policy elites.\textsuperscript{69} While the Iranian political system is hierarchical in structure, with the Supreme Leader overseeing almost every organ of the Iranian state, there are often only very few connections between each institution and power centre, and very little horizontal cooperation.\textsuperscript{70} In essence, the Iranian state is itself the “principal arena in which the competition (over power and influence) takes place. Rival claims over parts of the state and its resources are constantly played out, at times with considerable acrimony.”\textsuperscript{71} Increasing this acrimony, and only adding to institutional deadlock, is the emphasis the Iranian system places upon personalities and informality, which further weakens the system’s institutional arrangements as set out by the Iranian Constitution. Economically, ideologically, and politically like-minded individuals and factions within this system often form loose coalitions based around personal patronage and family links, and seek to use both their informal and formal positions to influence the Supreme Leader and undermine the agendas of rival institutions and individuals.\textsuperscript{72} Such personal networks trump the formal bureaucratic structure of the Iranian political system, and it is often more useful “to view the bonds of patronage and loyalty among various individuals than to view the system’s ideological, formal, or bureaucratic characteristics”.\textsuperscript{73} According to Buchta, Iran’s decentralised, quasi-feudal power and economic structure is a carryover of the hierarchical but decentralised structure of the Shi’a clergy.\textsuperscript{74} However, this system of governance is nothing new to Iran: Bill, in his 1972 study of Iran, outlined similar informal tendencies, whereby Iranian elites engaged in fierce battles “to gain greater


\textsuperscript{70} See Mehran Kamrava and Houchang Hassan-Yari, ”Suspension Equilibrium in Iran’s Political System,” \textit{The Muslim World} 94, no. 4 (2004): 495-524.

\textsuperscript{71} Kamrava, ”Iranian National-Security Debates,” 86.


\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 7.

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 6.
favour with the Shah and at the same time to capture more control in the Iranian economic
arena”. This situation is not dissimilar to how the Iranian political system works in the
post-revolutionary period, with the Supreme Leader taking the place of the Shah in the
game of political upmanship and patronage that has led to a chaotic, and at times
ineffective, policy-making environment.

Adding another level of rivalry and conflict within the Islamic Republican system are the
differing factions of the political elite, known widely and informally as the Conservative,
Pragmatist, and Reformist factions. These factions developed out of the ashes of the
Islamic Republican Party (IRP) founded by Khomeini and his followers in 1979. The
IRP consolidated its control over the Iranian state during the 1980s, but was plagued by
internal ideological and political disputes among its members, and was dissolved in 1987.
Since the dissolution of the IRP, hundreds of political groups and organisations have
developed which all work within Iran’s ideological and political framework, and can be
considered to fall under the banner of one of these three fluid and at times overlapping
factions, which rather than acting as cohesive and unitary entities are generally built
around powerful political personalities, and tend to act as political “fronts”. These major
factions cut across the formal state institutions, coalesce on common ideological and
political grounds, and seek to influence economic, social, and foreign policy. Broadly
speaking, the Conservative faction strongly supports notions of a patriarchal Islamic


75 James A. Bill, The Politics of Iran: Groups, Classes and Modernization (Columbus: Charles E.
77 The Iranian Constitution does allow for the formation of political parties, however according to
Arjomand “very few political organizations have been allowed to register as ‘parties’”. In the place of
parties, a range of fluid groups and organisations has developed, which do not have clearly defined political
objectives. Within the political establishment of the Islamic Republic there are deep suspicions and
objections towards the notion of party politics. The objections to the formation of parties range from clerical
paternalism, to the belief that parties sow dissent and undermine the cohesion of society. For further
discussion, see Arjomand, After Khomeini, 65.
78 Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, Syria and Iran, 31.
79 Rakel, Power, Islam, and Political Elite, 51.
government, traditional social life, the consolidation and expansion of revolutionary principles in both the domestic and international spheres, and political and economic self-sufficiency. The Reformist faction generally supports the promotion of civil society, the diminishing of state control over political and social life, economic liberalisation, and greater interaction with the outside world. The final and third faction, the Pragmatists, agrees with much of the Reformist’s agenda on the economy, and considers interaction, in particular with the West, as a necessity in ensuring Iran’s economic growth. However, in the spheres of politics and culture, the Pragmatists are much more conservative in their approach and views.

In the realm of foreign policy, Thaler et al. consider the Conservatives to be overwhelmingly supportive of adopting “an assertive foreign policy in defence of Islamic interests”. The Conservatives privilege relations with fellow Islamic countries and the wider Muslim world, and are reticent in engaging in rapprochement with the United States. The Reformists, and Pragmatists on the other hand, are more interested in ensuring that Iran is “at peace” with the international community, and generally pursue a moderate foreign policy agenda that safeguards Iran’s national interests, rather than any form of Islamist ideological agenda. These two different foreign policy agendas create considerable conflict within Iran’s body politic, and overlaid on top of the complex and weak institutional structure, have stifled the Islamic Republic’s ability to formulate coherent domestic and foreign policies throughout the post-revolutionary era.

81 Green, Wehrey, and Wolf Jr, Understanding Iran, 27.
82 Thaler et al., Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads, 79.
83 Ibid.
1.4 Key Institutions and Figures in Foreign Policy Decision-Making

The Islamic Republic of Iran’s complicated system of governance has had a major impact on how foreign policy has been conceived and implemented since the revolution.\(^{85}\) This

\(^{85}\) As can be seen in the figure above, the Supreme Leader has oversight over every arm of government, in the form of the legislative, executive and judiciary. Furthermore, the heads of the military and Iran’s heterogeneous and wide range of Islamic bodies, foundations and organisations report directly to the Supreme Leader, not the president. Figure based upon: Eva Patricia Rakel, *Power, Islam, and Political Elite in Iran: A Study on the Iranian Political Elite from Khomeini to Ahmadinejad* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 33.

\(^{86}\) There are very few publications that examine to an in-depth degree Iran’s domestic political structure. Two of the best however, are Buchta’s “Who Rules Iran,” and Rakel’s “The Iranian political elite, state and society relations, and foreign relations since the Islamic Revolution”. Both of these authors have interviewed a number of Iranian foreign policy elites in their works, and paint a highly credible and nuanced picture of the dynamics at play within the Iranian political system. This subsection is heavily indebted to both Buchta and Rakel’s work.
section will outline the key institutions and figures involved in foreign policy-making. This focus, therefore, makes it unnecessary to outline the whole institutional structure of the Islamic Republic. Institutions such as the Assembly of Experts87, the Expediency Council88, religious foundations89 and the judiciary, while important in understanding Iran’s internal power dynamics, are not examined due to their peripheral formal and informal role in the foreign policy-making processes of the Islamic Republic.

The Supreme Leader (Vali-e Faqih)

Sitting at the apex of the Iranian foreign policy pyramid is the Supreme Leader (Vali-e Faqih). The Supreme Leader is the most powerful figure within the Islamic Republic of

87 Other than the president and the parliament, the Iranian people also elect the Assembly of Experts. The assembly is made up of 86 clerics who serve an eight-year term. After ideological and political vetting is conducted by the Guardian Council, the assembly has the constitutional capacity to elect a Supreme Leader, or dismiss him if he does not fulfil his duties. See Rakel, Power, Islam, and Political Elite, 34.

88 The Expediency Council’s role is to mediate legislative conflict between the Guardian Council and the Parliament, and more importantly to advise the Supreme Leader on a range of political matters. It is a council of 31 clerical and non-clerical members who are all also directly appointed by the Supreme Leader. See ibid., 35. Although the Expediency Council does not play a strong formal role in the making of foreign policy, it does play a considerable informal role due to its members’ close relationships and dealings with the Supreme Leader. For instance, the Head of the Expediency Council, former President Ali Akbar Rafsanjani, who was appointed to this position in 1997, has sought to provide the Supreme Leader with guidelines and designs for foreign policymaking, and plays an influential role in the public discussion of foreign policy matters. For further discussion, see Abbas Maleki, "Decision Making in Iran’s Foreign Policy: A Heuristic Approach," Journal of Social Affairs 19, no. 73 (2002): 39-52.

89 Religious foundations are responsible solely to the Supreme Leader and his representatives. They are tasked with safeguarding the Islamic principles of the revolution and have a wide interest in Iran’s domestic economy, owning a number of large companies in a diverse range of sectors. Furthermore, they are also involved in charitable enterprises, acting in parallel to state welfare departments. There are also a range of non-elected clerical bodies, which are in the hands of the Supreme Leader, such as the Office of the Representative of the Supreme Leader, the Association of Friday Prayer Leaders, and the Special Court for the Clergy, all of which are mainly tasked with ensuring the Islamic character of Iranian state and society, and their presence and influence only further narrows popular participation in Iran’s governing processes. See Rakel, Power, Islam, and Political Elite, 38-39.
Iran, and the Office of the Supreme Leader is the centre around which all other institutions of the Islamic Republic revolve.\(^90\)

The Supreme Leader “supervises” the legislative, executive and judicial branches of Iranian government, and has the authority to appoint jurists to the Guardian Council, and can appoint Iran’s highest judicial authority. Furthermore, the Supreme Leader is also the Commander-in-Chief of The Guardians of the Islamic Revolutionary Corps (IRGC) (Sepah-e Pasdaran), appoints the Commander-in-Chiefs of the three branches of the Iranian armed forces, oversees the Supreme National Security Council (Shura-ye amniyat-e melli) (SNSC) through two representatives appointed by himself, and has the authority to mobilise troops and declare war or peace. The Supreme Leader also signs the appointment certificate of the president; he can also dismiss the president if the Supreme Court finds the president has violated his legal duties, or if the parliament (Majles-e Shura-ye Melli) finds the president to be “politically incompetent”. As summed up by Rizvi, the principle of the velayat-e-faqih gives the Supreme Leader “total control over the affairs of the state … all religious and political powers … thus rest in one person, and hence the vali-e faqih’s powers are far beyond those of any contemporary head of state”.\(^91\)

In foreign policy, the Supreme Leader oversees and controls a vast array of organisations and institutions that at times run parallel to, or in conflict with, policies enunciated by the popularly-elected president. However, rather than the Supreme Leader taking direct control over the vast organs of Iranian foreign policy-making, he instead appoints clerical representatives, or “commissars”, who embed themselves in every important Iranian state institution, both civilian and military, and play a major role in ensuring that the Supreme Leader’s views and ideological proclivities are adhered to when foreign policy is formulated and implemented.\(^92\) According to Buchta, these “commissars” are “more


\(^{91}\) Rizvi, "Velayat-E-Faqih," 114.

\(^{92}\) Buchta, Who Rules Iran?, 48.
powerful than ministers and other government functionaries and they have the power to intervene in any matter of state.” 93

The Supreme Leader also influences the direction of Iranian foreign policy through personally affiliated organisations and Iranian cultural and Islamic centres situated throughout the world. Organisations such as the Islamic Propagation Organisation (Sazeman-e tabliaghat-e eslami), the Hajj and Welfare Organisation, and the World Assembly for the People of the House of the Prophet (Majma-e jahani baraye ahl-e bait) are all closely associated with the Supreme Leader’s office, carrying out an array of functions such as the distribution of aid and monetary resources to Islamic movements, particularly in the Middle Eastern region. These organisations fall outside the scope of Iran’s foreign ministry, although they play a key role in furthering Iran’s “soft power” in a range of states. Also falling outside the responsibility of the Iranian foreign ministry are cultural centres attached to Iran’s worldwide network of embassies. These cultural centres report directly to the Supreme Leader through their head representatives, receive diplomatic protection due to being “attached” to Iranian embassies, and also pass on substantial support to Islamic movements, groups, and organisations throughout the world.94

Outside of Supreme Leader Khamenei’s shadow of influence over foreign affairs is the SNSC. The SNSC is the “nerve centre” for Iranian foreign policy-making, consisting of some of the most powerful figures 95 within the Iranian government. The SNSC coordinates all activities involving the ministries of defence, intelligence, and foreign

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93 Ibid.
94 Ibid., 50.
95 The members of the SNSC chaired by the President are the heads of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces, head of the Planning and Budget Organisation, the ministers of foreign affairs, the interior, and intelligence, departmental ministers if their portfolio is affected by a particular security matter, the commanders of the IRGC and the regular military, and two representatives of the Supreme Leader. See ibid., 24.
Although constitutionally the SNSC is controlled and chaired by the president, the role and influence of the Supreme Leader shapes all decisions made by the SNSC. During the foreign policy formulation process, the Supreme Leader’s representatives convey his views to the rest of the council and the president, thus ensuring that the Supreme Leader’s perspectives are taken upon board before any final decision is made. Rather than that of a hands-on operator controlling all levers of foreign policy-making, the Supreme Leader sets out the general parameters of Iranian foreign policy-making and ensures such policies are in line with the ethos of the Islamic Revolution. In doing so, the Supreme Leader largely bases his decisions on consensus, ensuring a number of differing views on foreign policy issues are canvassed through formal institutional channels, such as the SNSC, and through his informal channels of closely-linked intellectuals, religious leaders, business people, military commanders, and past and present politicians who may or may not have significant formal power, but due to their proximity to the Supreme Leader have considerable informal power in influencing his views on foreign policy. Although the Supreme Leader oversees a decision-making process which is characterised by consensus, no major foreign policy decision is made without his personal consent. Furthermore, it should also be mentioned that any decisions made must also take into account Khamenei’s somewhat idiosyncratic worldview. Since the outset of his reign Khamenei has aligned himself closely with conservative clerics and political figures as a means to solidify his rule and fend off challenges by those of a reformist bent to economically and socially reform the Islamic Republican system. In the realm of foreign policy, Khamenei has tended to stick closely to the platform set out by Ayatollah Khomeini rather than form his own approach to international affairs. However, according

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96 Ibid., 50.
97 Ehteshami, "The Foreign Policy of Iran," 293.
98 Hunter, Iran's Foreign Policy, 29.
99 Thaler et al., Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads, 44.
to Sajjadpour, Khamenei has also displayed pragmatism, often allowing others “leeway to initiate alternative policies—such as Rafsanjani’s rapprochement with Saudi Arabia (a government which Khomeini denounced as ‘evil’) and Khatami’s warming of relations with Europe”.101 Although this is the case, there have been two areas of foreign policy Khamenei has sought to maintain as the pillars of Iranian foreign policy—namely enmity and opposition towards the United States and Israel.102 This loathing of the United States and Israel has been a remarkably consistent aspect of Khatami’s views on foreign policy, and the idea of rapprochement with either state goes beyond the pale of what is possible for Iranian foreign policy elites.

The President

The president is Iran’s most powerful official after the Supreme Leader. Every four years Iranians vote to elect a new president, who is restricted to two consecutive terms. Presidential candidates are tightly vetted, with the Guardian Council tasked with selecting appropriate candidates who fit within the council’s and Supreme Leader’s conservative world view.103 This process thus has the effect of significantly diminishing the role of the Iranian public in the electoral process.104

The president is mainly responsible for the day-to-day decisions regarding economic and socio-cultural affairs. The president has the power to appoint and dismiss cabinet ministers, controls the Planning and Budget Organisation (Sazeman-e Barname va Buje), appoints the director of the Iranian Central Bank, and is the chairman of the SNSC.105

102 Ibid.
103 Thaler et al., Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads, 29.
104 Hunter, Iran’s Foreign Policy, 23.
105 Eva Patricia Rakel, "The Iranian Political Elite, State and Society Relations, and Foreign Relations since the Islamic Revolution" (PhD Diss., University of Amsterdam, 2008), 55.
Furthermore, the president implements legislation passed by the Iranian parliament, signs international agreements and treaties, is responsible for the state budget, accepts the credentials of foreign ambassadors, and signs the credentials of Iranian ambassadors.\textsuperscript{106}

In relation to foreign policy and national security, the president is subjected to significant political and constitutional barriers. The president has little formal control over foreign policy, and has no control over Iran’s armed forces, which constitutionally fall under the umbrella of the Supreme Leader.\textsuperscript{107} Despite this, every Iranian president has sought to expand their own power vis-à-vis the Supreme Leader in the realms of foreign policy and national security, with varying degrees of success.\textsuperscript{108} Iranian presidents have scope to shape Iranian foreign policy during the formulation and implementation stages, and while always needing to take the Supreme Leader’s guidance and direction into account, have shown a history of backing the Supreme Leader into corners on certain foreign policy issues to ensure that their own views and ideas take precedence. As described by Thaler et al. a good example of this was

Ahmadinejad’s assertion that Iran’s nuclear program [was] a national right. Painting the issue as a fundamental matter of sovereignty and independence makes it difficult for anyone (including Khameini) to compromise with the international community.\textsuperscript{109}

Generally however, for the president to have a major impact on the direction of foreign policy, the Supreme Leader’s views must be taken into consideration, and the president must not stray too far from the ideological red lines as set out by the Supreme Leader and his informal and personal cadre of military leaders, clerics, and policy elites. If the

\textsuperscript{106} Thaler et al., \textit{Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads}, 25.

\textsuperscript{107} Buchta, \textit{Who Rules Iran?}, 23.


\textsuperscript{109} Thaler et al., \textit{Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads}, 27.
president does not do this, he will potentially find his foreign policy initiatives white-
anted, and given very little institutional support.

The Supreme National Security Council

As already noted above, the SNSC is an integral institution in the formulation and
implementation of foreign policy-making in the Islamic Republic. According to the
Iranian Constitution, the SNSC is tasked with protecting the “national interests and
watching over the Islamic Revolution, as well as the territorial integrity and the national
sovereignty of the country”. According to Article 176 of the Constitution, the SNSC’s
functions and tasks are

determining the country’s policies concerning defence and security within the
framework of general government policy. Coordinating political, social, cultural
and economic activities that affect security, together with the general measures
adopted for defence and security within the country, making use of all the country’s
material and spiritual resources in order to mobilise resistance against domestic and
foreign threats.

The SNSC is made up of the president who is the chairman, the ministers of foreign affairs,
interior, and intelligence, the commanders of the regular army and the Islamic
Revolutionary Guard Corps, the heads of the legislative and judicial branches, and two
personal representatives of the Supreme Leader. According to Schirazi, the SNSC can be
viewed as a “super government”:

It makes decisions which should [constitutionally] at the very least, be supervised
by parliament. In fact, its decisions are an outright infringement upon the powers
of the legislature. And yet, parliament generally learns of these decisions only after
they are made. In some cases the council’s decisions contradict those of
parliament.

111 Ibid.
112 Ibid.
As noted above, although the president chairs this powerful institution, it is the views of the Supreme Leader, voiced by his two representatives that must be adhered to. No decisions are made by the SNSC without the approval of the Supreme Leader.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Unlike the case of most other states, Iran’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs plays only a minor role in the formulation of foreign policy. Rather, the ministry is responsible for the implementation of decisions made by higher-level officials, in particular, the Supreme Leader, and decision-making bodies such as the SNSC.113 Furthermore, Foreign Ministry acts as a valuable source of information for decision-makers higher up within Iran’s institutional structure. According to Maleki, analysis of foreign countries and international events comes directly via the Foreign Ministry through ambassadorial dispatches, and

[T]he Director Generals of various departments also send reports to the Deputies and Minister for Foreign Affairs. Input also is obtained through security agents, from miscellaneous media sources, from libraries abroad, from individual citizens of one country or another, and from think tanks and scholarly authorities in germane subject areas.114

Although the Foreign Ministry plays an influential role in the dissemination and analysis of information within the foreign policy decision-making process of Iran, the organisation is plagued by inefficiencies, and appointments are often made less on merit and more on links with powerful patrons. A number of Iranian scholars interviewed by the author were scathing in their criticism of the Foreign Ministry, commenting on its inability to implement policy in either an effective or efficient manner.115 These criticisms were also

113 Hunter, Iran’s Foreign Policy, 30.

114 Maleki, "Decision Making in Iran’s Foreign Policy," 39-52.

publicly elucidated in a roundtable discussion conducted by prominent Iranian think tank, the Institute for Middle East Strategic Studies, in 2000. During this roundtable, a number of prominent Iranian scholars discussed different issues facing Iranian foreign policy. According to Massood Qassemzadeh, an advisor to the Foreign Ministry, Iranian diplomacy since the Islamic Revolution had not been conducted in a “scientific” manner, and very little attention was given to developing expertise and knowledge within Iran’s diplomatic corp. In particular, Iran faced capacity issues in regions outside of Europe and the Middle East, wherein many of Iran’s most talented diplomats and other technocrats were unwilling to take assignments in emerging states based in Central Asia or Africa for instance.

The Majles (Islamic Consultative Assembly)

Every four years the Iranian public votes to elect 290 members to the Majles-e Shora-ye Eslami. The Majles is responsible for the drafting of legislation (Article 71–75), the ratification of international treaties (Article 77), approving the initiation of a state of emergency (Article 79), approving loans (Article 80) and the annual budget (Article 52), and has the ability to remove the president and his appointed ministers from office if they are found to be politically incompetent. The constitutional responsibilities of the Majles on paper are significant, but in practice this body has been constrained by executive power, and the unelected bodies of the Islamic Republic. For example, the Supreme Leader has displayed a history of intervening in the legislative process through so-called “state orders”, which have removed certain items of legislation that he does not


118 Rakel, "The Iranian Political Elite," 56.
agree with. In the realm of foreign policy, the SNSC has opposed and contravened the Majles’ legislative mandates, and has left parliament out of the loop on many of its decisions, most notably over nuclear issues. For instance, operations at the gas enrichment facility located at Natanz and the heavy water production facility at Arak had been conducted in secret for more than 18 years, and was only disclosed to the Majles when these operations were uncovered by the international community in 2002. The budget for these operations had not followed constitutional protocol, without funds being appropriated from the Planning and Budget Committee. Furthermore in theory all international treaties and agreements should be ratified by the Majles according to Article 77 of the Constitution. However, SNSC sidelined the Majles in acquiescing to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Additional Protocol (2003-2006) and other additional agreements including the Paris Agreement of 2004, and more recently the Joint Plan of Action in 2013. However, the Majles does have a long history of bringing the executive to account. For instance, the floor of the Majles and the Majles foreign policy committee are both vibrant outlets for discussion on foreign policy issues. Members of the Majles often ask for written clarification and responses regarding foreign policy decisions made by the executive. This provides members of the Majles a key opportunity to bring to the attention of the public decisions made by the executive, and to influence public opinion on foreign policy. Ehteshami and Hinnebusch contend that “although it may not always pay off, influencing public opinion is the traditional method of putting pressure on the executive to revise or continue to pursue a particular policy”. And this partly explains why for an authoritarian state, post-revolutionary Iran has had a comparatively vibrant public debate on political matters. On the balance, however, in theory the Majles should play a much larger role in foreign policy, but in practice its

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121 Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, Syria and Iran, 35.
functional input is circumscribed, with its members concentrating mainly on local issues concerning their electorates.\textsuperscript{122}

The Council of Guardians

The 12-member Council of Guardians’ role in domestic politics cannot be understated. The council is tasked with ensuring that Iranian laws comply with the Iranian Constitution, and approves the candidates to be elected to the presidency, Majles, and the Assembly of Experts. In the area of foreign policy, the Guardian Council is also tasked with ensuring that Iran’s foreign policies comply with the Iranian Constitution. For instance, the Guardian Council played a critical role during the contested election of 2009, declaring that Ahmadinejad had indeed won against his reformist rival Mir Hossein Mousavi. Furthermore, the Guardian Council outright rejected the prospect of a fresh election, calling the vote the “healthiest” Iran had carried out in years.\textsuperscript{123} The Guardian Council’s head, Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, is a particularly influential figure within the Islamic Republic. Holding the chairmanship of the Guardian Council since 1988, Jannati is a strong supporter of the conservative status quo, and was considered a key spiritual and ideological ally of controversial president, Ahmadinejad.\textsuperscript{124} Jannati’s position in the Guardian Council, along with his membership of the Assembly of Experts and the Expediency Council, makes him one of the most powerful figures within Iran, and a number of observers have criticised his role in hindering political and social reform within Iran, and of favouring conservative elements of the Islamic Republican system.\textsuperscript{125}

\textsuperscript{122} Farhi, "The Parliament". 


The Armed Forces

The Armed Forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran are split between a regular military, which consists of the Islamic Republic of Iran Army, Air Force, and Navy, and a revolutionary military, which consists of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps—Army, Navy, Air Force (IRGC), a paramilitary militia (basij), and the Law Enforcement Forces. Both the regular and revolutionary arms of the armed forces are under the supervision of the Ministry of Defence and Armed Forces Logistics, while the Law Enforcement Forces are subordinate to the Ministry of Interior. Both the regular and revolutionary Armed Forces are responsible for defending Iran’s territorial integrity. However, the IRGC acts as a counterbalancing force against the regular military, whose loyalty to the revolution was questioned following the fall of the Shah. The IRGC is also tasked with defending the “ideological purity” of the Islamic Republic, and also maintains domestic order. Providing support for the IRGC’s tasks is the paramilitary basij, which was established by Ayatollah Khomeini to protect the Islamic Republic against “domestic enemies” and US influence.

Iran’s regular armed forces are often called “the silent beauty” due to their distaste for intervening in the daily cut and thrust of Iranian politics; the IRGC, on the other hand, is highly politicised, and involved in a number of Iran’s political, social, and economic

126 Iran’s armed forces are poorly equipped, but numerically large. Iran’s regular land forces consist of about 350,000 members, and the IRGC land forces with about 100,000 members. Most of these men are poorly-trained conscripts, with considerably outdated military materiel. The Iranian regular air force and the air branch of the IRGC consists of about 25,000 to 35,000 members, and are equipped with about 312 combat aircraft, many of which have no mission capability and were purchased prior to the revolution. The 18,000-man strong Iranian regular navy is also seriously underequipped with a small number of obsolete surface and below surface vessels, many of which have their origin in the Shah’s rapid attempts to turn Iran into an Indian Ocean power in the 1970s. The IRGC navy has approximately 100 small missile craft, gunboats, and shore-based anti-maritime batteries, and consists of about 12,000 to 15,000 men. See Anthony H. Cordesman, "The Conventional Military," Iran Primer, http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/conventional-military, accessed March 12, 2015.

spheres. The IRGC’s economic and political power substantially outweighs its military significance, with many current and former members of the IRGC in positions of great influence in both Iranian politics and business. Due to it being one of the more autonomous power centres within the Islamic Republic, the IRGC has consistently fended off efforts by the clerical elite and the executive to rein in and control its activities. This independence has seen the IRGC’s role in domestic and foreign politics expand considerably over recent years. The clearest indication of this was during the presidency of the reformist Mohammad Khatami. The IRGC spearheaded a number of confrontations with the Khatami regime, and successfully undermined many of its political, economic, and social agendas, both domestic and foreign, acting as a “praetorian guard” for more conservative political factions and societal groups. Buchta asserts that in “contrast to the regular military, the IRGC considers itself less a professional military force and much more a revolutionary political force, though the two are not considered mutually exclusive”. Current and former IRGC members head a range of Iranian organisations, such as economic foundations, bonyads, two universities, two think

128 Amir Taheri, "Iran’s Top General Offers Note of Sanity " New York Post, July 17, 2013.

129 Buchta, Who Rules Iran?, 70.

130 In 2003 veterans of the IRGC took control over a number of city and provincial councils, opening the door for their entrance into the 2004 Majles elections. During the 2004 Majles elections, 91 of the 152 new members elected were linked to the IRGC, and in the 2005 presidential election, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was one of four candidates who were former members of the IRGC. This political influence only increased during the presidential term of Ahmadinejad, who appointed an unprecedented number of former IRGC members to his administration. See Green, Wehrey, and Wolf Jr, Understanding Iran, 12-13.

131 Ibid.

132 Buchta, Who Rules Iran?, 68.

133 Bonyad, means "Foundation" in Persian. Bonyads are tax-exempt charitable trusts. Bonyads were initially founded as "royal foundations" by Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi. These organisations became nationalised after the 1979 Revolution by Ayatollah Khomeini and now make up a significant and powerful element of Iranian economic life. For further discussion see Thaler et al., Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads, 56-58.
tanks, policy journals and a number of media outlets. According to Wehrey et al. “from laser eye surgery and construction to automobile manufacturing and real estate, the IRGC has extended its influence into virtually every sector of the Iranian market”.

This significant economic clout and political independence has allowed the IRGC to play a major, albeit constitutionally informal, role in Iranian foreign policy-making. IRGC companies and bonyads have invested significant amounts of money and conducted a range of activities, independent of the oversight of the Iranian Foreign Ministry, in a number of foreign countries. The IRGC also plays a key role in the “official” formulation of policy, with IRGC commanders taking part in SNSC meetings. However, the IRGC’s informal influence is much more significant. According to Byman et al., the IRGC “routinely exploits its access to the Supreme Leader’s office, volunteers advice on national and foreign policy matters to the Leader and his key staff, and actively aims to influence policy and debate on security issues”. In particular, the IRGC is highly prominent in shaping Iranian security policy in the context of the Middle East, where it has developed its own independent network of contacts with groups and individuals outside of the formal foreign policy-building process. For instance in Lebanon and Syria, the IRGC is often seen as the most prominent of Iranian state bodies in the development of policy, and generally very few decisions are made without consulting the IRGC leadership. However, in regions such as Central Asia, the IRGC wields very little influence over Iranian foreign policy, nor does it see the region as a great priority within

134 Frederic Wehrey et al., The Rise of the Pasdaran: Assessing the Domestic Roles of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2009), 12.

135 Ibid., XV.

136 IRGC-affiliated bonyads have a number of economic dealings with countries in the Middle East, Europe, Africa, and South Asia. See ibid., 58.

137 For instance during the Iraq War (2003-2011), the IRGC took the lead in working with Shi’ite opposition groups, and anti-American forces. This work was done outside of the oversight of the Iranian Foreign Ministry. See Parker, Persian Dreams, 241.

138 Daniel Byman et al., Iran’s Security Policy in the Post-Revolutionary Era (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2001), 28.
Iranian security calculations. Furthermore, the IRGC plays a key role in shaping the discourse of Iranian foreign policy through its ownership of a number of news media outlets, and contacts with Friday prayer leaders. The IRGC often criticises and “warns” the president from taking certain decisions on foreign policy matters, and places the views of its commanders and former members front and centre within public debate. Although the IRGC’s influence is difficult to measure due to its informality, its members have ensconced themselves within every level of Iranian foreign policy-making over recent years, and have become key players in some of Iran’s most important foreign policy endeavours, such as Iran’s nuclear program, and in the alleged export of “terrorism” and Islamic propaganda.

**Outer-Core Elites and Opinion makers**

Outer-core and discourse elites can be considered those who sit outside, or have informal links with, the formal foreign policy decision-making apparatuses within the Islamic Republic as described above. Prominent non-establishment and establishment clerics, intellectuals, academicians, semi-independent think tanks, and journalists all attempt to shape and influence internal decision-makers and the wider public opinion and discourse surrounding Iranian foreign policy-making. As already mentioned, the Iranian political establishment is highly fractured. Therefore, those with a considerable political, clerical, and social profiles and gravitas attempt to influence the foreign policy process through informal mechanisms. For instance, former foreign ministers, presidents, and military commanders often seek to use their former positions of power to shape the internal dynamics and processes of foreign policy-making. Furthermore, politicians and regime

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139 Byman et al., *Iran’s Security Policy*, 80.

140 Ibid., 28.


142 The concept of ‘discourse elites’ was used by Rakel in her seminal analysis of Iranian domestic political dynamics. For further discussion, see Rakel, *Power, Islam, and Political Elite*, 44.
figures who are not able to play a direct role in formal decision-making processes also attempt to place their views into the wider public domain. These elites use Iranian domestic media, informal professional, family, and personal networks, and prayer groups to outline and disseminate their ideological and political viewpoints, with the goal of encouraging and discouraging those responsible for formal decision-making from undertaking certain measures in the pursuit of Iranian foreign policy.

In particular, the importance of the media in disseminating the views of the outer-core and discourse elite, and shaping public opinion in Iran on foreign policy matters cannot be understated. This importance is outlined by Hunter, who states:

The press serves as a platform for various politicians, religious leaders, and intellectuals to voice their views on foreign policy challenges faced by Iran and on how to deal with them successfully. The Leader is apprised of the diverging views, and various analysis and policy options are also presented to him. Prominent members of Iran’s Reformist, Conservative, and Pragmatist political factions seek to score political points over their rivals, and to push their faction’s ideological and political viewpoints to the wider public, through media publications affiliated with their faction or party.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, there was a considerably large and vibrant media establishment within Iran. In 2000 for instance, there were 16 daily newspapers in circulation, six weeklies, a number of bi-weeklies, and three political monthlies dedicated to debating political matters available in Iran. This media openness declined significantly during the presidency of Ahmadinejad, with many periodicals and

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143 "The Iranian Political Elite," 40.
144 Hunter, Iran's Foreign Policy, 29.
145 Ehteshami, "The Foreign Policy of Iran," 296.
newspapers closed down due to their criticism of government policies.\textsuperscript{146} However, during Ahmadinejad’s presidency, the use of non-traditional forms of media, particularly online media, grew substantially. This growth came about despite a number of restrictive measures instigated by the Iranian state, such as internet filtering, the slowing of bandwidth, and the blocking of websites. For instance, in 2005 only 10.8 percent of the Iranian population had internet access, however, in 2012, 53.3 percent of the Iranian population had access to the internet\textsuperscript{147}, a staggering increase, which allowed the Iranian public to obtain a variety of different views on foreign policy matters.

1.5 Conclusion

This chapter outlined a range of domestic variables that influence Iranian foreign policy-making. Although it is difficult to do justice to the vibrancy of Iran’s domestic culture, and the sheer complexity of its governmental dynamics, it is clear that Iranian state and society are far from homogenous. While Iran’s unique resource endowment and key strategic position have placed Iran’s leaders, both pre and post-revolutionary, into similar foreign policy quandaries. The overlay of a rich and double-headed national character that reifies both Islam and nationalism has ensured its elites have a range of differing worldviews, which shape how Iran deals with its foreign policy challenges. Furthermore, the institution of a unique form of government following the Islamic Revolution of 1979, which adopts theological and republican elements, has only added another layer of difficulty in explaining how foreign policy decisions are made within the Islamic Republic.

This chapter has set out to display that foreign policy decision-making is not as clear cut as imagined by lay observers of Iranian politics. A range of inputs, worldviews, factional


positions, and historical and cultural factors must be taken into account when analysing Iranian foreign policy. While this may be the case, perhaps the domestic element that influences Iranian foreign policy-making the most is the at times chaotic nature of Iran’s factional and highly informal system of government. Those who have power in the “official” and constitutional sense do not always have real power within the Iranian political system. The highly factionalised and informal nature of the Iranian political system, which has its basis Iran’s Islamic Republican Constitution, has placed considerable constraints on the ability of Iran’s political elites to deal with foreign policy matters in a cohesive and efficient fashion. This has had a deleterious impact on Iran’s international position and standing, and as the following chapter will show, this chaotic domestic environment, coupled with a challenging and volatile systemic environment, has left Iran excluded from greater international affairs, and placed it in an extremely vulnerable position, which has an undeniable impact on its relations with Tajikistan since the fall of the Soviet Union.
Chapter Two: The Islamic Republic of Iran: The Regional and International Context

Overlaid on Iran’s complex internal political structure is an unstable and fractious regional and international environment. From its establishment, the Islamic Republic has had to contend with near-constant upheaval on its borders and difficult challenges stemming from its unique geographical location. These challenges were made all the more difficult following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, which completely reoriented Iran’s strategic environment, and led to a range of new dilemmas that Iranian foreign policy planners continue to grapple with to the present day. This chapter analyses the influence regional and international factors have had on Iran’s post-Cold War foreign policy in Central Asia.

The establishment of five newly-independent states in Central Asia (Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) brought a range of new opportunities and challenges, which policy planners in Iran sought to capitalise upon. However, Iran had only very limited success in the region, which this chapter argues can be directly attributed to the formation of a unipolar international system overseen by Iran’s bitter rival and the world’s sole superpower, the United States. The United States over the past 20 years has conducted a range of foreign policy actions that have caused deep alarm within Iran’s foreign policy establishment. From efforts to contain Iran through an ever stricter program of sanctions, to the invasion of neighbours on Iran’s eastern and western borders, Iran’s scope for external action throughout the post-Cold War period has been circumscribed by the United States’ so-called “unipolar moment”.


2 Charles Krauthammer is often credited with popularising the notion of unipolarity. See Charles Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment,” Foreign Affairs 70, no. 1 (1990): 23-33. However, Krauthammer did not invent the term himself, rather it can be traced to the earlier work of Harold Laswell and Abraham
Furthermore, not only has Iran had to deal with the American dominance of the international system, it has also had to confront significant regional instability, and a series of regional rivals and so-called “partners” who have consistently sidelined and undermined Tehran, thus further weakening its regional and international position throughout the past 20 years. Through analysing the wider regional and international dynamics that have affected Iran’s interactions with Central Asia, this chapter provides the context for this thesis’ analysis of Iran’s bilateral relations with Tajikistan, which have largely been held to ransom by factors far beyond either state’s control.

2.1 1991-2001: Iran, Central Asia and the United States’ Unipolar Moment

The end of the Cold War provided the United States with an unprecedented opportunity to reshape the global order and maintain its political and military dominance for decades to come. Much of these goals were elucidated in an internal Pentagon document that was leaked to the *New York Times* in 1992. The doctrine formulated by the then Under Secretary of Defence, Paul Wolfowitz, stated that the United States’ “first objective is to prevent the re-emergence of a new rival, either on the territory of the former Soviet Union or elsewhere, that poses a threat on the order of that posed formerly by the Soviet Union. This is a dominant consideration underlying the new regional defence strategy and requires that we endeavour to prevent any hostile power from dominating a region whose resources would, under consolidated control, be sufficient to generate global power.”

Seeking to consolidate and expand this power, the United States turned its gaze towards the strategically vital region of Central Asia. As aptly highlighted by Brzezinski in his seminal work, *The Grand Chessboard*, how the United States “managed” Central Asia, and the Eurasian landmass more broadly, would be “critical” in deciding the United States’

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political future. The United States therefore made it a key focus of its post-Cold War foreign policy to both encourage and cajole the Central Asian states that had once formed part of the Soviet political architecture to move towards the US political orbit, open their markets to investment by American private enterprise, and accept the primacy of liberal market-based capitalism.

The United States was not the only state to display an active interest in Central Asia. Iran also viewed the development of economic and political ties with a region it felt “irredeemably a part of” with considerable excitement, and also set out quickly to consolidate and establish its influence within the region. However, the prospect of Iran influencing and developing relations with the newly-independent Central Asian republics was viewed with utter distaste by US officials. As a state that had a history of pursuing Islamist-based agendas, and one which sought to increase its relative power through the maintenance of a largely independent and often anti-Western foreign policy stance, Iran was viewed in Washington as a major threat to the emerging interests of the United States not only in Central Asia, but also within the much broader post-Cold War international


5 Ibid., 38. and for further discussion, see Fuller, “Central Asia and American National Interests,” 129-142.

6 Implicit in this effort was an attempt to compel states that had once been part of the former Soviet political architecture to move away from maintaining close partnerships with Russia.

security environment. In response to the “threat” of Iran, the United States throughout the administrations of both George H.W. Bush (1989-1993), and Bill Clinton (1993-2001), built up a formidable and permanent military presence to Iran’s south in the Persian Gulf, consistently blocked Iranian access to new technologies and financial resources through ever-tightening and draconian sanctions measures, and sought to freeze Iran out of the Central Asia region. The most vicious of these sanctions was imposed by the 1996 Iran and Libya Sanctions Act, (ILSA). ILSA was designed to ensure that no American, or any other foreign company for that matter, could invest in Iran’s hydrocarbon sector. The United States was cognisant of the fact that Iran’s fragile post-war domestic economy required massive levels of international private investment and expertise. If this private investment did eventuate, Iran could potentially reinvigorate its economy, and further expand its economic and therefore political presence beyond its borders, a prospect that the United States found deeply alarming.

According to US policy planners Iran was a dangerous, ideologically-driven actor that, if given the opportunity, would spread its unique messianic vision outside its borders and

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8 Hunter, Iran's Foreign Policy, 7.

9 According to Kenneth Katzman, “the Clinton Administration and many in Congress maintained that these sanctions would deprive Iran of the ability to acquire weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and to fund terrorist groups by hindering its ability to modernise its key petroleum sector”. Under ILSA, the President of the United States was required to sanction any American or foreign companies (entities, persons) that invested more than $20 million in one year in Iran’s energy sector. See Kenneth Katzman, The Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA), (Washington D.C.: Congressional Research Service Report for Congress, 2006), 1-2. However, ILSA was never fully enforced against Asian and European enterprises that continued to invest in Iran. According to David Ramin Jalivand, sanctions “obviously had a negative impact on trade, investment, and the development of energy projects. But ultimately, foreign and in particular European companies were engaged in the Iranian energy market, and high oil prices, as well as investments from Asian countries, compensated for Iran’s reduced ability to access global capital.” See David Ramin Jalivand, "Iran's Gas Exports: Can Past Failure Become Future Success?," in Oxford Institute for Energy Studies (Oxford: Oxford University, 2013), 13.

promote instability. The worst case, albeit far-fetched scenario for political apparatchiks in Washington was the potential that an expansion of Iranian influence into Central Asia could auger the beginnings of an anti-American, pro-Iranian, Islamist bloc of states, which could act as an obstacle to US strategic, economic, and political agendas in the post-Soviet regional political vacuum.

While American policy planners sought to hype the potential of Iran spreading its ideology in the region, Iranian elites themselves were more than aware that attempting to spread their state’s much maligned religiously-informed revolutionary ideology—which had formed the basis of its foreign agendas in the Middle Eastern region throughout the 1980s—to the Central Asian region would be exceedingly difficult, and counter-productive in forwarding their country’s interests. As highlighted by Akiner, despite the fact that many experts and Western policy planners predicted that Iran would be at the forefront in any external attempt to re-integrate the Central Asian region into the wider world of Islam, at the outset of Central Asian post-Soviet independence, Iranian clerics had been “conspicuous largely by their absence”. According to Akiner,

After the collapse of the Soviet Union delegations from Iran began to visit the Central Asian states and to acquire first hand familiarity with the region. They soon realised that an Islamic revolution along the lines of the Iranian model was not a realistic prospect; this was partly because of the very low level of knowledge of Islam among the population at large, but also, and very importantly, because of the lack of a trained, independent-minded ulama (body of trained Muslim scholars).

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11 Iranian political elites vehemently denied Iran had a ‘messianic vision’ for Central Asia. A former Iranian Ambassador took particular umbrage at claims by prominent Western academics who had suggested in the early 1990s that “Iran was building mosques, but Turkey was building factories”, a statement which he considered to be absurd and inaccurate. Former Iranian Ambassador, Personal communication with author, Tehran, April 11, 2013.

The fact that the Iranians represent the Shi’a tradition also placed them at a disadvantage. 13

Alongside these very important internal dynamics, unique to the Central Asian region, was the weakening of Iran’s ideological pretensions towards the end of the 1980s. After more than eight years of war with Iraq, the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, and the desperate need to rebuild Iran’s floundering economy, Iran’s government focused much less on spreading Islamic revolution and much more on so-called pragmatic national interests. Therefore, by the time of Central Asian independence, Iran was much less burdened by the weight of its revolutionary ideology, which alongside the fact that Central Asia had rarely rated a mention in official religious discourse, and had no real “symbolic significance” for the Islamic Republic in comparison to areas such as Palestine and Jerusalem in the Middle East, ensured that ideology rarely raised its head in Iran’s actions towards the region. 14

However, even though the Iranian government placed very little emphasis on its Islamic identity, and its policies towards the Central Asian region were “overwhelmingly pragmatic” and free of ideological agendas, Iran was viewed with considerable suspicion among many of the region’s elites. 15 In particular, during the period of the Tajik Civil War (1992-1997) Iran was often accused by the region’s leaders of supporting Islamist movements and stoking disorder, which often left it at a disadvantage in the scramble to influence the Central Asian region. Most notably Uzbekistan was at the forefront in offering itself to the West as a rampart against Islamic fundamentalism and as a barrier


14 Hunter, "Iran's Pragmatic Regional Policy," 139.

15 After almost 100 years of Russification and Sovietisation, the elites of Central Asia displayed considerable anxiety towards the possibility that Islamic states such as Iran would attempt to ideologically influence their societies and polities. This anxiety in the case of Iran was only enhanced by its Shi’a and revolutionary character. Tarock, "Iran's Policy in Central Asia," 197.
to Iranian influence. On a number of occasions, Uzbek President Islam Karimov made inflammatory remarks and pointed allegations towards Iran and its apparent Islamic agendas in the region. Furthermore, Karimov fully supported the US containment efforts, much to the chagrin of Tehran. Although none of the other Central Asian republics displayed as much hostility towards Tehran as Uzbekistan did, all at different times raised suspicions towards Iran and its foreign policy agendas in the region.

In an attempt to overcome these suspicions, Iranian elites sought to focus much of their diplomatic efforts in promoting trade links with their new eastern neighbours. In particular, Iran sought to capitalise on its apparently “natural role” as a trade link between east and west, proposing the construction and expansion of road, rail, and energy networks, which would bind Iran closely to the region. Among such projects proposed by Iran were pipeline routes which would link oil and gas rich Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to the Persian Gulf, and road and rail networks that would eventually connect Iran to China. Such Iranian proposals offered the Central Asian republics a cost-effective and efficient means to link their economies to world markets, while reducing their dependence upon Russia, which stemmed from the Soviet system of infrastructure that had placed the Central Asian republics in a major economic bind, wherein all pipeline and transport routes were linked to Russian markets. In the post-Soviet period, Russia attempted to maintain its monopoly over these routes, and consistently sought to block efforts to diversify the infrastructure links of the Central Asian republics to the outside world. These Russian efforts had the potential to stymie the future growth of the

16 Hunter, "Iran's Pragmatic Regional Policy," 142.


18 The most prominent and expensive of these proposals was a United States plan to link European markets to Central Asia through a submarine gas pipeline extending from Turkmenistan to Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey onwards to Europe, effectively bypassing not only Russia, but also Iran. See Ariel Cohen, "The New Great Game: Oil Politics in the Caucasus and Central Asia," The Heritage Foundation (January 25, 1996). http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/1996/01/bg1065nbsp-the-new-great-game,
economies of Central Asian republics, and would allow Moscow to fully dictate their future political orientations. In such circumstances, Iran’s proposals to act as a window to the outside world were attractive, however Tehran only had minor success.

In the early years of Central Asian independence, Iran established a series of gas and oil swap arrangements in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, and established trade relations with the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan; overall however, its economic relations with the region throughout the 1990s were quite minor. Iran was hamstrung by a weak economy, a lack of technical expertise, and also the inability to provide the capital required by the Central Asian republics to develop their foundering national infrastructures. Furthermore, the nature of the Central Asian republics’ borders, whereby each is landlocked and all relied upon a secondary state to fulfil many of their infrastructure and supply needs, hampered many of Iran’s economic proposals. While Iran had the potential to act as a “window to the outside world”, the practicalities of coordinating infrastructure projects, which either relied upon the cooperation of two or more Central Asian states or an extra-regional state, often posed an insurmountable challenge. For instance, to establish a pipeline from Iran to Tajikistan would have required infrastructure to pass through an unstable Afghanistan, or through Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, the latter of whom benefited from a weakened and isolated Tajikistan. Instead of working together, the Central Asian republics more often than not competed against each other and rarely exhibited political or economic solidarity and unity. Moreover, the rulers of the Central Asian states were so busy trying to just survive and maintain stability within their own borders that attention to much larger, albeit unified, issues were often of secondary importance.


Overlaid on top of these complex regional dynamics were the unilateral steps taken by the United States against Iran, which blocked the achievement of many of Tehran’s regional economic and political goals. To this day, Iranian political elites bemoan lost opportunities within Central Asia. For instance, an Iranian politician interviewed by the author, stated that the United States was the major obstacle for the establishment of Iranian projects—such as pipelines, railways, and roads in Central Asia. The politician further declared that a renaissance of a “great Silk Road” in Central Asia could have been possible following post-Soviet independence, but the United States had acted as a “negative element” in the region, and had “fully influenced” how the countries of the region interacted and continue to interact with Iran, convincing them to not engage in trade and political dialogue with Iran.²⁰

This is not to say that the Central Asian republics lacked political agency, or were unable to make their own decisions in attempting to build relations with Iran. However, in the face of sustained and overt US political pressure, and Iran’s continued isolation on the international stage, no Central Asian state would sacrifice broader relations with the United States or the West, bringing as they did the prospect of economic investment, developmental aid, and international legitimacy, for the sake of a tight and multifaceted relationship with a weakened and politically sidelined Iran.²¹

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²⁰ Iranian politician, Personal communication with author, Tehran, May 4, 2013. This was a fact made clear by then US Secretary of State James Baker, who declared in 1992 to a Congressional hearing that Iran’s presence in the region was one of the reasons why the United States was motivated to open embassies and develop a greater political and economic presence in the region. See Thomas Friedman, "U.S. To Counter Iran in Central Asia," *New York Times*, February 6, 1996. Furthermore in 1997, the *Silk Road Strategy Act of 1997* (S. 1344) was introduced to the US Senate, which would provide incentives for the Central Asian states to cooperate with each other and with the United States, rather than with Iran. See Katzman and Nichol, *Iran: Relations with Key Central Asian States*, 4.

²¹ An example of this was US President Clinton’s pressuring of Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev support energy pipeline routes that bypassed Iran. Nazarbayev said he would support such routes if the United States could arrange finance. See David Ottaway and Dan Morgan, "U.S. Backs Non-Iranian, 'Eurasian' Corridor West for Caspian Sea Oil," *Washington Post*, November 20, 1997. For further US
2.2 The ‘Sideling’ of Iran and Regional Rivalry in Central Asia

Iran’s difficulty in engaging fully and productively with the Central Asian region was only accentuated by the actions of a number of regional rivals who sought to take advantage of the United States’ newfound post-Soviet global dominance. States such as Pakistan and Turkey distanced themselves from Iran and increased their own strategic value in the eyes of the United States “by promoting themselves as barriers to the spread of Iranian style Islamic revolutionary ideas to Central Asia and the Caucasus”. For instance, Turkey as a secular, and apparently democratic partner of the West, enthusiastically acted as a cat’s paw for United States influence in the Central Asian region. US policy planners strongly supported Turkish political engagement and economic initiatives in Central Asia as an alternative to a so-called “Iranian model” of Islamic governance. According to Bal, Turkey was seen within the West as a successful example of a democratic secular state, with a liberal economic system fused with an Islamic culture. Therefore, policy planners in Washington believed that Turkey could bring so-called “European values” to the Central Asian region, as opposed to the “Islamic values” propagated by Iran. Furthermore, former President of the United States George H.W. Bush described Turkey as a “beacon of stability”, while “US companies were encouraged to find Turkish partners for joint ventures in Central Asia”, and “US attempts to isolate Iranian pipeline developments see "Clinton Backs Multiple Pipelines in Caspian Region," Reuters News, October 3, 1995.

22 Hunter, "Iran's Pragmatic Regional Policy,” 136.

23 Due to its cultural and linguistic affinities with the Turkic republics of Central Asia, Turkey was seen as a state that could act as reliable partner to not only the region’s republics but also to the West. In early 1992, US Secretary of State James Baker encouraged all of the republics to adopt the so-called ‘Turkish model of governance’. See Robin B. Wright, "Islam, Democracy and the West," Foreign Affairs Summer (1992). Furthermore, President George H.W. Bush declared that Turkey could act as a model “to others, especially those newly independent republics of Central Asia”. See George H.W. Bush, "Remarks at the Departure Ceremony for Prime Minister Suleyman Demirel of Turkey, February 11, 1992," The American Presidency Project. http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=20586, accessed August 28, 2015.

24 Idris Bal, Turkey's Relations with the West and the Turkic Republics: The Rise and Fall of The Turkish Model' (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2000), 114.
diplomats encouraged Central Asian politicians and bureaucrats to travel to Turkey to see a modern country at work.\textsuperscript{25} On the back of this US support, Turkey made substantial inroads, quickly becoming a major economic, cultural, and political player in Central Asia, usually at the expense of Iranian initiatives, which were actively discouraged by the United States.\textsuperscript{26}

Further to this encouragement for Turkish foreign policy in Central Asia, the United States paradoxically supported the Central Asian foreign policy agendas of two states that had a long history of supporting Sunni fundamentalism and political violence, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Disturbingly, both states were the main financial and political supporters of the Taliban, who took control over most parts of Afghanistan in 1996. The US State Department even went as far as welcoming the Taliban’s takeover of Kabul, viewing the Taliban in a favourable and embarrassingly misguided light due in no small part to their anti-Iranian stance.\textsuperscript{27} Certain segments of the Clinton administration were so obsessed with isolating Iran from the Central Asian region that they favoured the establishment of pipeline and trade routes to and from Central Asia through Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. Such trade and pipeline routes would provide the Taliban’s ally and patron Pakistan, and by extension American private enterprise, with greater influence within the region at the expense of Iran.\textsuperscript{28} Prominent figures in Washington welcomed the potential for the Taliban to act as a countervailing force against Iran in the region, and were not displeased as the Taliban expanded its presence throughout Afghanistan. For

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 115.


\textsuperscript{28} For discussion of the links between American private enterprise, the Taliban, and influential figures within the US government see Hunter, \textit{Iran's Foreign Policy}, 152; Parker, \textit{Persian Dreams}, 175, and Kleveman, \textit{The New Great Game}, 223-225.
instance in 1996, Zalmay Khalistad, later the first post-9/11 US Ambassador to Afghanistan, actively lobbied the Clinton administration to engage with the Taliban, claiming that there were “common interests between the United States and the Taliban”, and “the US should actively assist the Taliban because even though it is fundamentalist, it does not practise the anti-US style fundamentalism of Iran”. As is now known, such plans quickly turned awry for US policy planners, and throughout their short and brutal rule in Afghanistan the Taliban sought to foster links among Central Asian Islamist groups, and became the major security threat to the region; a development, which in many respects can be blamed on US acquiescence at best, and support at worst, for Pakistani and Saudi foreign policy in the region.

2.3 The Impact of a Weakened Russia

The efforts by the United States and its regional allies to limit Iran’s interactions with Central Asia were only enhanced by the inability of Russia to fulfil its former role as an international and regional balancer to US power. Russian weakness effectively allowed the United States to act with regional impunity, and with the absence of a major power that it could bandwagon with, Iran became increasingly more vulnerable following the Soviet collapse. Prior to the end of the Cold War, Iran had a fractious relationship with Russia’s predecessor, the Soviet Union, which was viewed as no less satanic than the United States. However, only three weeks after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, Iran’s speaker of parliament and future president, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, made a historic visit to Moscow, signing a number of trade, economic, and military technical assistance contracts worth almost US $6 billion. Rafsanjani’s visit was received

31 Hunter, "Iran's Pragmatic Regional Policy," 140.
positively by then Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, who hoped that the agreements signed could act as a vital first step in the improvement of relations between the two neighbours, and provide both states with significant political, economic and strategic benefits in the years to come.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the reincorporation of Russia into international politics therefore created major uncertainty for Iran, which had counted on Soviet support to break free from international isolation. Russian President Boris Yeltsin (1991-1999), while inheriting the agreements signed between Moscow and Tehran prior to the fall of the Soviet Union, initially took a considerably different tack towards Iran than that of his Soviet predecessors. Rather than viewing Iran as a potentially important regional political partner against its former Cold War rival, the United States, Russia instead sought to develop a strong alliance with the United States, which Yeltsin hoped would culminate in Russia joining the so-called Western “civilisational club”. Such an alliance, according to Yeltsin, would ensure the success of Russian domestic economic and political reforms, and eventually lead to the restoration of a Russian status equal to that of the United States. Within Yeltsin’s government were a plethora of policy planners who were enamoured of the idea that Russia and the United States could forge some form of “strategic alliance”. This pro-American and Western bias predictably led to the deterioration of Iran’s ties with Moscow, and set off bitter arguments within Russian domestic politics.

In particular, Russian foreign policy throughout the 1990s was characterised by debates between political elites who subscribed to a “Euro-Atlanticist” view of international politics, and those who pursued a “Eurasianist” stance. Simply put, those subscribing to


34 Hunter, Iran's Foreign Policy, 108.
Euro-Atlanticism were largely pro-Western, and viewed Islam as a major threat to Russian security. Euro-Atlanticists perceived Russian identity as closely tied to the West, and considered the Islamic regions to Russia’s south as distinct and apart from “Western”, “civilised” Russia. On the other hand, Eurasianists viewed Russia as a unique entity that did not require “partnership” or “subservience” within the Western international order. Instead, Russia should act independently, and attempt to develop stronger relations with other states such as India, China, and Iran as a means to counter-balance Western power. Furthermore, Eurasianists believed Russia was in a unique position to develop constructive relations with the Islamic world, to which it had been tied for centuries. The proponents of Euro-Atlanticism had been ascendant throughout much of Yeltin’s presidency. Sharing similar views to their counterparts in Washington, these Euro-Atlanticist Russian policy elites viewed Iran not as a partner but as a threat to Russia’s security.\(^{35}\) The dominance of this belief, and the view that Russia’s best interests were served by integrating within the Western dominated political order, led Russia to keep Iran largely at arm’s length. Iran was not a viable political partner, it was instead a threat to regional stability, and an obstacle on Russia’s path to achieving legitimacy in the eyes of the West.\(^{36}\)

### 2.4 The Russian-Iranian-American Triangle

Although segments of Russia’s political elite hitched their wagon to the idea that their state’s future lied in close cooperation with the United States and the West, the realities of the unipolar system, in particular the dominance of the United States as opposed to


\(^{36}\) The Eurasianist strand of foreign policy thinking gained ascendancy within Russian domestic politics towards the end of the 1990s, with prominent Eurasianists such as Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov gaining key positions of influence. However, both Eurasianism and Euro-Atlanticism have ebbed and flowed as influential aspects shaping Russian foreign policy, and should not be seen as the only guiding factor driving Russia’s interactions with the international community. For further discussion, see Lajos F. Szaszdi, *Russian Civil-Military Relations and the Origins of the Second Chechen War* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2008), 9-43.
Russian weakness, eventually dispelled these misguided ideas. It became clear that Russian hopes of a close partnership with the United States could not take place without Russian subservience to Western economic, political, and cultural interests and demands. This was evident in a series of US policies and agendas that directly undermined Russian political interests, such as the effort to expand NATO and the Partnership for Peace program into the domains of the former Soviet Union, the support and partnership the United States gave to fundamentalist Muslim states supporting violent insurgencies within Russia’s borders, and the sustained efforts of the United States to encourage Turkey to become a major player within Central Asia at the expense of not only Iran, but also Russia. All of these policies created deep resentment and disillusionment in Russia towards the United States, where there was a growing belief that Yeltsin’s foreign policy had become too centred upon the West.

In response to Yeltsin’s early dalliance with the West, Iran acted in a largely cautious and restrained manner towards its northern neighbour. Mired in international isolation and economic malaise, Iran needed Russia, and it did not want to alienate Moscow, nor see the full breakdown of relations between the two states, notwithstanding the fact that Russia was undertaking a number of actions that were harmful to Iran’s strategic interests. Furthermore, despite a number of opportunities to pursue its own interests and undermine Russia’s long-standing influence in the Central Asian region, Iran’s early regional policies were largely “Russo-centric”, in the sense that no foreign policies were made in

37 Hunter, Iran's Foreign Policy, 110.

38 A prominent example of this was the United States’ close ally Saudi Arabia arming Islamic fundamentalists and anti-government forces in Dagestan and Chechnya. See Michael Powelson, “U.S. Support for Anti-Soviet and Anti-Russian Guerrilla Movements and the Undermining of Democracy,” Demokratizatsiya 11, no. 2 (2003): 297-304.

39 Hunter, Iran's Foreign Policy, 111.
Central Asia or in the former Soviet space more generally without taking into consideration the possible reactions and views of Russia.\textsuperscript{40}

This Russo-centrism in Iranian foreign policy was a symbol of Iran’s vulnerability, and a clear Iranian acknowledgement of Russia’s historical interests in the region, which limited the potential expansion of Iran’s interests in the scramble to influence Central Asia following the collapse of the Soviet Union. While the United States and its allies were making significant inroads into Central Asia, and in the process disregarding Russian sensitivities, Iran refused to fully pursue its interests in the region. Iranian policy planners feared that a strong attempt to increase their state’s influence in Central Asia would antagonise Russia’s political leadership, who could quite easily shut the door on cooperation, and undermine Iran’s broader attempts to break free from international isolation.\textsuperscript{41} Equally important to Iran was the need to ensure that Russia did not renege on the Soviet arms and technological agreements signed in 1989, which were critical to Iran’s national security, particularly in light of the presence of the US military on its southern doorstep.

Iran’s relationship with Russia began to improve by 1995. Iran’s apparent “good behaviour” in Central Asia, coupled with continued US efforts to expand NATO into Russia’s “near abroad”, and a rising sense of Russian nationalism, led to strong calls within Russia to display greater independence in the international arena, and ignore US efforts to isolate Iran. Caving into such domestic demands, Yeltsin approved the sale of nuclear reactors to Iran, and was also reported to have assisted Iran with its missile program, despite vehement opposition from the United States. Furthermore, Russia allowed Iran to play a pivotal political role in some of Central Asia’s more intractable issues, such as the Tajik Civil War, where Iran and Russia jointly acted as peace brokers.

\textsuperscript{40} Mesbah, "Iran and Central Asia: Paradigm and Policy," 109-39.

between the Tajik government and opposition groups\textsuperscript{42}, and in Afghanistan where both states supported anti-Taliban forces\textsuperscript{43}. Furthermore, both states sought to work together on blocking American attempts to influence the development and supply of hydrocarbon resources within the Caspian Sea, and the efforts (supported by the United States) of the other Caspian littoral states to break historical Soviet-Iranian Caspian demarcation treaties.\textsuperscript{44} According to Belopolsky, “as the Russian–American relationship went into decline, Iran came to be used as an expression of Russian defiance in balancing American hegemony”.\textsuperscript{45} Increasingly Russia’s relations with Iran were a means to show the United States that Russia had the right to have relations with whomever it chose, and that it was not a “junior partner” within the United States’ newfound international order.\textsuperscript{46}

However, despite this cooperation and the warming of relations between Tehran and Moscow, Russia continued to display an inconsistent policy towards Iran throughout Yeltsin’s presidency. On a number of occasions Yeltsin and his government bowed to US political pressure and reneged on agreements signed with Tehran.\textsuperscript{47} For instance, Russia refused to sell Iran a series of gas centrifuges and other technologies for its nuclear program, and dragged its feet on the completion of the Bushehr nuclear power plant.

\textsuperscript{42} For discussion on Tajik peace talks and the dynamics of Russian-Iranian relations, see Mesbahi, “Tajikistan, Iran, and the International Politics of the ‘Islamic Factor’,” 141-58; Tetsuro Iji, “Cooperation, Coordination and Complementarity in International Peacemaking: The Tajikistan Experience.” \textit{International Peacekeeping} 12, no. 2 (2005): 189-204.

\textsuperscript{43} For discussion of Iran’s support for the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan, see Milani, ”Iran's Policy Towards Afghanistan,” 235-56; Adam Tarock, “The Politics of the Pipeline: The Iran and Afghanistan Conflict,” \textit{Third World Quarterly} 20, no. 4 (1999): 801-20.

\textsuperscript{44} Carol R. Saivetz, ”Perspectives on the Caspian Sea Dilemma: Russian Policies since the Soviet Demise,” \textit{Eurasian Geography and Economics} 44, no. 8 (2003): 591.

\textsuperscript{45} Helen Belopolsky, \textit{Russia and the Challengers: Russian Alignment with China, Iran, and Iraq in the Unipolar Era} (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 128.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{47} See Hunter, \textit{Iran's Foreign Policy}, 103-16.
Most galling for Iran however, was the decision by Russia to eventually renege on its joint position on territorial agreements in relation to the Caspian Sea. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, both Iran and Russia had worked jointly together to oppose efforts by Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan to split the Caspian into exclusive sectors in line with international treaties governing seas and oceans.  

48 Iran and Russia’s position was that previous treaties signed between the Soviet Union and Iran should remain in force until a new agreement could be reached. Therefore, the resources of the Caspian, particularly its hydrocarbon resources, should not be exploited until a new territorial agreement was put in place. Furthermore, both Iran and Russia believed that any future agreement would also need to take into account the fact that the Caspian Sea was an inland lake, thus making it imperative upon all states to take a condominium approach to managing its resources.  

49 Such a position was vociferously opposed by the Kazakhs, Turkmen, and Azeris, who with the support of Washington disregarded Moscow and Tehran, and invited numerous Western companies to explore for and begin exploitation of the Caspian’s potentially large hydrocarbon reserves.  

50 As it became clear that Iran and Russia’s opposition had not stopped the other littoral states from exploiting the hydrocarbon reserves of the Caspian, Moscow backflipped on its former shared position with Iran and abandoned its support for the condominium approach. In 1998, Russia signed a bilateral territorial agreement with Kazakhstan, and later, in 2002, a similar agreement was signed with Azerbaijan. The signing of these treaties effectively legitimised Azeri and Kazakh territorial claims, left Iran isolated on many of the territorial


49 Russo-Persian Treaty of Friendship (1921)

50 Saivetz, "Perspectives on the Caspian Sea,” 582.

disputes that continue to plague the Caspian to the present, and signalled a further weakening of its regional position.\textsuperscript{52}

Russia’s contradictory foreign policy towards Iran under Yeltsin looked set to enter a much more promising stage leading up to and following the inauguration of new President Vladimir Putin, in 2000. In Moscow there was even talk that Iran could possibly become a “strategic partner” to what was becoming an increasingly assertive Russia.\textsuperscript{53} This confidence reached its apogee following Putin’s annulment of the 1995 Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement, which would have restricted Russia from selling arms to Iran after 1999, and the much-anticipated signing of The Treaty on Foundations of Relations and Principles of Cooperation between the two states in 2001, following a state visit to Moscow by Iranian President Khatami. However, despite much promise, Russian policy towards Iran remained erratic.\textsuperscript{54} The lifting of the Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement did not bring about greater arms sales to Iran, and the signing of the cooperation agreement between the two states did not inaugurate anything close to a “strategic partnership”. Instead, Russian-Iranian relations reached a new low. Russia continued to delay the construction of the Bushehr nuclear power plant, while consistently bowing to American demands to limit arms and nuclear dual-use technology sales to Iran. In Russia’s eyes a close relationship with Iran, and with it the continued supply of dual-use technologies, could eventually see Iran become a nuclear armed power, which had the potential to upset the regional political balance and threaten Russian security.\textsuperscript{55} Furthermore, while Russia indeed had its differences with the United States, it did not wish these differences—in particular those relating to Iran—to culminate in the development of a full-blown breakdown of relations with Washington. Instead, in the post-ideological political space,

\begin{footnotes}
\item[52] Saivetz, "Perspectives on the Caspian Sea," 582.
\item[53] Mark N. Katz, "Russia and Iran," Middle East Policy 19, no. 3 (2012): 54-64.
\item[54] Hunter, Iran's Foreign Policy, 112-13.
\item[55] For an excellent outline of the rivalry and cooperation inherent within Iran's relationship with Russia see Clement Therme, "Iran and Russia: A Tactical Entente," in Iranian-Russian Encounters: Empires and Revolutions since 1800, ed. Stephanie Cronin (Oxon: Routledge, 2013), 377-400.
\end{footnotes}
Russia was more than willing to make deals and agreements with the United States at the expense of Iran. Both Putin and Yeltsin followed a policy towards Iran that could be best described as “minimax”, whereby Russia would attempt to maximise its influence in Iran, while at the same time try to minimise the damage such ties were inflicting upon United States-Russian relations.56

2.5 9/11 and the Rise of an Activist US Foreign Policy

The striking imbalance of power, and the enormous capabilities that were at the United States disposal in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, allowed the United States to disregard established rules of international conduct, and ignore the wishes of allies and rivals alike.57 However, despite this opportunity to act with impunity, US foreign policy in the first decade of the post-Soviet period was largely restrained and status quo-driven. This behaviour led scholars to assert that the United States was a “reluctant” hegemon due to its general unwillingness to act in a revisionist or activist fashion.58 The United States displayed a clear aversion to acts of unilateralism and military interference in the internal affairs of other states—unless there was a direct threat to US national interests.59 Furthermore, rather than striking out alone militarily, the United States sought to act in concert with other states, preferring the cloak of legitimacy offered by multilateralism and international organisations such as the United Nations and NATO. This conservative and “hands-off” strand of American foreign policy came to an abrupt end, however, following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (9/11). Under the presidency of George W. Bush (2001-2009), the United States was consumed with a new sense of

56 Freedman, “Russian-Iranian Relations in the 1990s,” 73.
57 Hunter, Iran's Foreign Policy, 7.
59 Smith, Power in the Changing Global Order, 69-70.
activism, which set in train a course of events that created considerable regional instability in the Middle East and Central Asia, and only further eroded Iran’s regional and international security situation.

Following the Al Qaeda attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Centre, President George W. Bush declared that the United States was at war with the Al Qaeda terrorist organisation and its Afghan hosts, the Taliban. 60 Despite the hostility that existed between Tehran and Washington, Iran’s political leadership offered to cooperate in US efforts to punish Al Qaeda and overthrow the Taliban in Afghanistan. Iran had for many years vehemently opposed the Taliban, 61 and willingly provided the United States with intelligence on military targets, contact with key anti-Taliban commanders, sanctuary for distressed pilots, and access to Iranian territory for the transport of humanitarian aid. This cooperation extended into the post-invasion period, whereby Iran lent its significant political influence in Afghan domestic politics to ensure the successful establishment of Afghanistan’s first post-Taliban government, led by the American-backed Hamid Karzai. The United States and Iran, although seemingly strange bedfellows, had a shared interest in ensuring a stable post-Taliban political order in Afghanistan, and there was indeed great hope within Iran that this cooperation would lead to constructive relations with the United States on a broader international level. 62

60 Ibid., 71.

61 This opposition had only increased after the Taliban went on a rampage through Mazar-e Sharif in 1998, massacring Shi’ites and also kidnapping and later murdering 10 Iranian diplomats and one journalist. Iran in retaliation threatened to invade Afghanistan, and massed more than 70,000 troops on its eastern border, but ultimately pulled back from the brink of war. See Roy Gutman, How We Missed the Story: Osama Bin Laden, the Taliban, and the Hijacking of Afghanistan (Washington D.C.: Institute of Peace Press, 2008), 148.

Hopes for rapprochement and further cooperation between Iran and the United States were not to be. Within the Bush administration were a number of influential figures who subscribed to a political ideology popularly known as “neo-conservatism”. Broadly speaking, neo-conservatives insisted that in the post-Soviet period, the United States had an undeniable opportunity to pursue a range of idealistic goals within international relations. The most prominent of these goals would be to bring democracy to authoritarian states, and change the political make-up of states and regions that were deemed threatening not only to American interests, but also to American ideals. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 provided the unfortunate pretext for neo-conservatives within the Bush administration to implement this vision, which had the impact of dramatically widening how the United States conceptualised its enemies and its interests. In the eyes of the neo-conservatives, the “War on Terror” should not just stop at attempting to eliminate Al Qaeda and removing the Taliban from power in Afghanistan. US foreign policy should also be geared towards confronting, not only diplomatically but also militarily, states that were deemed to be supporting terrorists, and attempting to procure weapons of mass destruction. This view was clearly elucidated by President Bush in his 2002 State of the Union address, where he declared that the United States was engaged in an existential struggle with a so-called “Axis of Evil” that was led by, but not limited to, Iraq, North Korea, and Iran. This somewhat Manichean view on world politics was viewed with

63 Although neo-conservatism gained prominence, through the works of the influential William Kristol, and Robert Kagan in the 1990s, and in the Bush Administration with key figures such as Paul Wolfowitz, Donald Rumsfeld, and Dick Cheney—all strong proponents of the neo-conservative ideology—the antecedents of the neo-conservative movement are much older, stretching back to the 1960s. For further information about the history of neo-conservatism, see Gary Dorien, Imperial Designs: Neo Conservatism in the New Pax Americana (New York: Routledge, 2004).


65 The ‘axis of evil’ speech undermined President Khatami’s moderate reform agendas and his attempts to reintegrate Iran into the international system, dashing any hope that the two states could come to some form of regional and international modus vivendi. Furthermore, the speech also had the impact of empowering Iranian hardliners who had warned against cooperating with the ‘Great Satan’, effectively
shock in Tehran. Iran’s outreach to the United States throughout its invasion of Afghanistan had come to naught. The quick victory over the Taliban, and the seemingly successful destruction of major elements of Al Qaeda, had given the United States considerable confidence, and limited its need to cooperate with “rogue states” such as Iran.

The United States went about implementing its vision for a democratic and Western-aligned international order with gusto. In 2003, the United States took its neo-conservative vision to a new level, using shaky evidence to legitimate its invasion of Iraq, insisting that dictator Saddam Hussein was attempting to gain access to weapons of mass destruction, and that he was supporting a number of terrorist organisations, the most prominent of which was Al Qaeda. The swift speed in which the United States overthrew the Hussein regime only further contributed to a growing sense of hubris and triumphalism among neo-conservatives, while heightening fears in Tehran that it was next on the US regime change “hit list”. Iranian fears towards US intentions were further justified in light of the fact that the Bush administration expanded its financial and material support to opposition groups within Iran, attempted to refer Iran to the United Nations, paving the way for the election of the much more confrontational and anti-American President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005. See Hiro, Inside Central Asia, 386; Crist, The Twilight War, 428-29.

66 A former senior minister conveyed this shock, stating that Iran’s political establishment could not understand why Bush had made such a speech, particularly after the constructive dialogue between Iranian and American political elites at the successful Afghan negotiations in Bonn, Switzerland. Former Minister. Recorded interview with author, April 2013.

67 The Bush administration sought to justify its invasion of Iraq by stating that the country was attempting to restart its nuclear weapons program, and had access to biological and chemical weapons. Such claims were based on questionable intelligence and to this date no chemical or biological weapons have been uncovered. See Daryl G. Kimball, "Iraq’s Wmd: Myth and Reality," Arms Control Today 33, no. 7 (2003): 2.

68 Under the presidency of Bush, a strategic revolution was about to take place within American foreign policy whereby it was assumed that in a world of threatening and ‘evil’ states “the best form of military defence was offence and that even when one was not immediately threatened by another state it was still legitimate to attack it”. See Michael Cox, "From the Cold War to the War on Terror," in The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations, ed. John Baylis, Steve Smith, and Patricia Owens (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 154.
Nations Security Council due to questions over its nuclear program, accused Iran of supporting Al Qaeda, and expanded its military presence and political influence to nearly every one of Iran’s neighbouring states—Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Iraq, Pakistan, and Turkey—except for Turkmenistan and Armenia.69

The threat of a US invasion and the increased penetration of American influence throughout Iran’s borders had an undeniable impact upon the Iranian government. However despite the Bush administration’s “Afghan betrayal”, Iranian President Khatami on a number of occasions continued to seek to engage in political dialogue with the United States in the hope that Iran could reach some form of “grand bargain”, and avoid military conflict over its nuclear program.70 Such attempts were rebuffed by the Bush administration. As was declared by one prominent administration official, “we [Bush administration] don’t talk to evil”.71 Only 10 years after the fall of the Soviet Union, a whole new geopolitical environment was imposed upon Iran. Although Iran was pleased to see the back of the Baathist regime in Iraq, and the Taliban in Afghanistan, the arrival of an overwhelmingly large US military and political presence on its borders only further narrowed its regional options, and increased the feeling of complete strategic encirclement.72

The effects of the newfound, muscular, US foreign policy was particularly apparent in Central Asia, where Iran had already grappled with a decade of American efforts to sideline it from regional developments. The United States increased its interests in Central


70 For a discussion of Khatami’s efforts to seek better relations with the United States and its ultimate failure, see Jahangir Amuzegar, ”Khatami's Legacy: Dashed Hopes,” The Middle East Journal 60, no. 1 (2006): 57-74.


Asia substantially following 9/11. In support of its invasion and continuing military operations in Afghanistan, the United States signed a range of military agreements with the Central Asian republics, establishing military facilities in the Kyrgyz Republic and Uzbekistan. Furthermore, the United States provided significant amounts of military and economic aid to the region’s republics. US aid to Central Asia increased dramatically post-9/11; for instance in 2000 total US aid to the region sat at $178 million, however in 2002 this figure rose to $476 million. Furthermore, the share of the total US aid that went to military and security funding for the Central Asian republics increased from around 5 percent throughout the 1990s to more than 30 percent in 2007. Unsurprisingly, this increased political and military engagement of the United States was warmly welcomed by the Central Asian republics who sought to broaden their international relations, increase their own security through the de-Talibanisation of neighbouring Afghanistan, and gain economic benefits, while increasing their strategic weight and importance.

73 While the largest and most important of the US military bases were situated in Karshi-Khanabad in Uzbekistan, and Manas in the Kyrgyz Republic, all of the republics offered overflight rights. Apart from the US presence, Germany had access to an airbase situated in Termez, Uzbekistan, France had troops stationed in the Kyrgyz Republic and a logistics centre in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, and the Netherlands was allowed use of the Bishkek airport in the Kyrgyz Republic. See Arthur Dunn, “NATO in Central Asia,” European Dialogue (April 4, 2012), http://www.eurodialogue.org/nato/NATO-in-Central-Asia, accessed December 17, 2013. Tajikistan offered the United States and its allies access to three airbases situated in Kulyab and Kurgan-Tyube in the southern part of the country and Khujand in north-western Tajikistan. In the end the United States, along with Great Britain and France, established only a small military operation in Dushanbe, as all the bases offered were found to be in poor condition or unsuitable to the military operations in Afghanistan. See Susan L. Clark-Sestak, U.S. Bases in Central Asia, (Alexandria: Institute for Defense Analyses, 2003), 10.

US interest in Central Asia under the Bush administration was not only limited to military and logistical considerations. The United States strongly encouraged political and economic reform, which was viewed as “an integral part of the campaign toward victory in the War on Terror”.  

Central Asian democratisation and market liberalisation dovetailed neatly with the Bush administration’s focus on tackling radical Islam and terrorism. As a majority Muslim region with weak state structures and fragile economies, Central Asia was viewed as an ideal breeding ground for the growth of Islamic extremism, which had to be cleansed through US strategic support and economic and political engagement. The United States not only had to rid Afghanistan and the wider region of extremists, it also had to eradicate “the underlying conditions” which fed the emergence of terror in the first place. As summed up by Rumer, the new US strategy in post-9/11 Central Asia “made political and economic reform, along with support for good governance, a precondition of winning the War on Terror”.  

This reform focus did, however, contradict the US regional security interests. More often than not the lofty ambitions of the United States for democratic and economic reform in the region took a back seat to security calculations, and led to confusion and disjuncture between US policy and actual behaviour. For instance in Uzbekistan, American officials would consistently commend the regime led by Karimov for its support in the “War on Terror”, but at the same time criticise the regime for its unwillingness to undertake democratic reforms and abide by international human rights standards. These

75 Eugene Rumer, ”The United States and Central Asia: In Search of a Strategy,” in Central Asia: Views from Washington, Moscow, and Beijing, ed. Eugene Rumer, Dmitri Trenin, and Huasheng Zhao (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2007), 43.

76 Svante E. Cornell, ”The United States and Central Asia: In the Steppes to Stay?,” Cambridge Review of International Affairs 17, no. 2 (2004): 242.

77 Rumer, “The United States and Central Asia,” 44.

78 Ibid.

contradictions had the effect of greatly undermining American policy in the region, and caused considerable misgivings among the region’s leaders. In essence, the regimes of Central Asia were willing to take American security assistance, but were reticent to accept the democratic and economic reforms that were apparently so cherished by the Bush administration.  

2.6 Iran in Post-9/11 Central Asia

With few friends in the international arena, and seemingly next on the US list of regime change candidates, Iran looked to increase its influence in Central Asia as a means to diversify its regional relations, ensure regime survival, and counter the increasingly muscular post-9/11 regional policies of the United States. Iran’s caution, which characterised its approach to the region prior to 9/11, gave way to a much more proactive and expansive foreign policy agenda, and surprisingly—despite the increased presence of the United States in the region—directly following 9/11 Iran did improve its bilateral relations with the Central Asian republics. In particular, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan expanded their trade links with Iran, while extending and increasing oil and gas swap arrangements. Iran also maintained modest, yet improving, economic relations with Uzbekistan, the Kyrgyz Republic, and Tajikistan, which had been enhanced by a rapidly growing Iranian economy and the willingness of the Central Asian republics to diversify their relations. For instance, Iran undertook the development of a number of large infrastructure projects in Tajikistan, such as the Sangtuda-2 development. In Uzbekistan and the Kyrgyz Republic, Iran increased its trade and economic influence, and benefited

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82 Pahlavi and Hojati, "Iran and Central Asia," 226.
from the tense relations that began to develop between these two states and the United States over military-basing agreements and American democratisation efforts.\textsuperscript{83}

The improvement of Iran’s relations with Central Asia, although largely driven by its desperate need to circumvent US containment efforts, can also be partly attributed to the willingness of the Central Asian republics to develop a multi-vector foreign policy stance in response to the changing political dynamics occurring within the region. The post-9/11 period was characterised by growing rivalry and competition between outside powers, such as China, Russia, and India, who all attempted to increase their influence and counter American inroads made within Central Asia.\textsuperscript{84} The increased international attention given to the region was a political boon for the Central Asian republics, who all sought to diversify their relations and avoid over-reliance on any one extra-regional state actor.\textsuperscript{85}

Further benefiting Iran’s interactions with the Central Asian republics was the frequent political missteps taken by American policy planners. The US Central Asian strategy, which connected the problem of Islamic militancy with the lack of democratic development, and its active attempts to promote political and economic reforms, were highly unpopular with the region’s elites. The Central Asian republics on a number of occasions distanced themselves from the United States, or attempted to find alternative

\textsuperscript{83} See ibid., 226-29. Between 2000 and 2010 imports from Iran to Central Asia increased from $500 million to $4 billion, and its share of the total world exports to the Central Asian market rose from 3.3 percent to 4.8 percent. Exports from the Central Asian region also increased during the same period, rising from $2 billion to $2.8 billion, with the share of total exports increasing from 2 percent to 2.8 percent. See Roman Mogilevskii, "Trends and Patterns in Foreign Trade of Central Asian Countries," in Institute of Public Policy and Administration Working Paper (Bishkek: University of Central Asia, 2012), 30-31.


\textsuperscript{85} Building relations with Iran could be also used as a mechanism to gain benefits from rival states who were also seeking to increase their influence in the region. For example, Central Asian elites consistently used the prospect of economic and political relations with Iran to gain further concessions from the United States, who remained fearful of Iran’s agendas in the region, See Hunter, Iran's Foreign Policy, 169-84.
partners who would not interfere in their domestic affairs. In such circumstances, Iran, despite its lack of economic capabilities and the impediments of sanctions, was only too willing to offer itself up as a “reliable” and non-intrusive alternative to the United States and other Western states.

2.7 Iran ‘Looks East’ to Russia and China

In the years that followed 9/11, Iran did manage to improve its ties with the states of Central Asia. However, Iran’s hostile relations with the United States continued to impede it from fully integrating economically and politically with the region. Furthermore, the American invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq had only increased the Islamic Republic’s regional isolation and vulnerability. Countering Washington’s containment efforts became an “objective for Tehran in its own right”, as Iranian policy planners sought to find new ways to frustrate the US agendas, and solidify and expand upon the modest gains made within the region. In particular, Iran’s leaders attempted to decrease their state’s susceptibility to US pressure by taking advantage of the increased international rivalry taking place within Central Asia. Key to this goal was not only improving its bilateral ties with the Central Asian republics, but also increasing its cooperation with China and Russia. Iranian policy planners believed that developing positive relations with these two major powers could allow Iran to circumvent growing American economic and political pressure, provide significant economic benefits, and could also eventually lead to the creation of a countervailing bloc of states, which would undermine and bring to an end American unipolarity.

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88 Maleki, "Iran," 183.
89 Ibid., 170.
90 Ahmadinejad consistently proposed a ‘new world order’ of multiple centres of power, which could confront the ‘global arrogance’ of the United States. Key to this ‘new world order’ would be the
Since the early 1990s, Chinese and Russian elites had intermittently highlighted the vital need to develop a strategic partnership between their states, and also other regional states such as Iran, as a means to counter US power, and build a more “equitable” multipolar international system.\(^91\) The idea of forming an international order with multiple centres of power, although popular and finding resonance within both Russia and China, did not come to fruition. Elites in both states were hamstrung by mutual suspicions and rivalries that had long existed between their states, and were unwilling to place at risk economic and political relations with the United States. The development of an outright anti-American coalition would be too costly, and would not provide sufficient benefits in the post-Soviet international order.\(^92\)

However, the instigation of a large American military presence on both states’ borders led Moscow and Beijing to reassess the costs and benefits of creating such a countervailing bloc. Both states shared Iran’s feeling of encirclement, and viewed the presence of American military bases upon their weak strategic underbellies as a threatening and “systematic US challenge to their interests”.\(^93\) Furthermore, Russia and China were aware that the United States was not in the region only to remove the Taliban, American goals were much more expansive, and could lead to the Central Asian republics becoming enveloped within American economic, military, and political structures.\(^94\) In response, Russia and China banded together, and relentlessly attempted to delegitimise US regional policies, proclaiming that American policy was a direct threat to the region’s

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\(^92\) Hunter, *Iran’s Foreign Policy*, 14-15.

\(^93\) Blank, "The Strategic Importance of Central Asia: An American View," 84.

stability, and in the process portrayed themselves as status quo-driven actors who were unwilling to interfere in the domestic politics of the region’s regimes. In line with such a strategy, China and Russia claimed that US influence in the region was geared towards delegitimising Central Asia’s authoritarian regimes and supporting opposition groups, thus stimulating the growing unease felt by the region’s leaders towards US political agendas and reform efforts. Furthermore, both states sought to wield a range of economic, diplomatic, and military levers to dissuade the republics from signing military agreements, or from offering or extending military-basing arrangements with the United States and its Western allies.

Another significant aspect of Russian and Chinese policy within Central Asia following 9/11 was the utilisation of multilateral and regional institutions as a means to further entrench or expand their influence over the region’s republics. The most prominent of

95 Ambrosio, Challenging America’s Global Preeminence, 81.
97 For instance, Russia promised more than $1 billion in military aid to the Kyrgyz Republic and brought considerable diplomatic pressure to bear in an effort to end the US military presence in that country. Such overtures were ultimately successful. US forces left the Kyrgyz Republic in early 2014 upon the request of the Kyrgyz Government. See Joshua Kucera, “U.S. Checked in Central Asia,” The New York Times, November 4, 2013. Furthermore, Russia has consistently sought to maintain a monopoly over Central Asia energy infrastructure networks, while actively thwarting attempts by the Central Asian republics to diversify their trading partners. By maintaining such a monopoly, Russia has a vital lever which can be used to pressure the republics to avoid developing closer relations with the United States and its allies. Russia’s monopoly over Central Asian energy markets, according to Laruelle, constitutes what can be considered as a ‘resource-extraction dependency’, and effectively allows Russia to veto any actions by the Central Asian republics that could be harmful to its strategic and political interests. See Marlène Laruelle, “Russia and Central Asia,” in The New Central Asia: The Regional Impact of External Actors, ed. Emilian Kavalski, (New Jersey: World Scientific, 2010), 149-76. See also Stephen Blank, "Russia's Energy Sector Hides Weaknesses Behind Powerful Facade," Eurasianet (May 15, 2006). http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/business/articles/eav051606.shtml accessed December 17, 2013. Dmitri Trenin, "Russia and Central Asia: Interests, Policies, and Prospects," in Central Asia: Views from Washington, Moscow and Beijing, ed. Eugene Rumer, Dmitri Trenin, and Huasheng Zhao (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2007), 75-136.
these regional institutions was the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and its predecessor the “Shanghai Five”. The SCO included Russia, China, the Kyrgyz Republic, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, all states which shared a range of security concerns relating to Islamic fundamentalism and ethnic separatism. The so-called “three evils”—extremism, terrorism, and separatism—were consistently at the top of the SCO’s agendas, but were also joined by other goals such as ensuring the territorial integrity of the region’s states, fostering good neighbourly relations, and encouraging common economic development irrespective of each state’s internal political arrangements. In the post-9/11 regional fallout the SCO, which had only been formally instituted in June 2001, looked highly likely to become a “hollow” and “discredited” organisation.

The Central Asian republics, enamoured of the potential economic and political benefits of aligning themselves with the United States, displayed a lukewarm attitude to the SCO, and towards Russia and China’s regional agendas more generally. However the instability of 2005 that led to the bloody uprising in Andijan in Uzbekistan, and the “Tulip Revolution” which saw the overthrow of President Askar Akayev in the Kyrgyz Republic, only increased perceptions among Central Asian elites that the United States was meddling in their domestic affairs and supporting opposition groups. In the wake of these two crucial regional events, the United States stood opposed to the region’s leaders, firmly


100 Ibid., 132.


102 Clarke, “China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization,” 129.
supporting the so-called “revolutionaries” in the Kyrgyz Republic, and sharply rebuking Tashkent for its heavy-handed tactics towards protesters in Andijan. According to Torbakov, these two events, and the American reaction to them, were the primary factors in pushing the region more toward Moscow, as Washington’s reaction made it clear to Central Asia’s regimes that they would not be able to count on the United States for security assistance during potential emergencies. Furthermore, governments across the region, whether rightly or wrongly, [believed] the United States [was] supporting anti-government movements that these regimes see as coalitions between Islamist and pro-Western forces. \(^{103}\)

This American stance also had the added effect of increasing the attractiveness of the SCO among the Central Asian republics; Russia and China were only too happy to use this organisation as a vehicle to weaken American regional influence.

The increased tension felt by the Central Asian leaders towards American reform efforts in the region, and the gradual turn towards the SCO, was on full display at its June 2005 summit wherein SCO members made a joint statement requesting a timeline be provided for the pull-out of American military forces in the region. This not-so-subtle message that the warm regional embrace of the United States was officially over was further underscored by the Uzbek government’s cancellation of its military basing agreement with the United States in the months following that summit. Furthermore, the SCO declared in 2006 that not only was it committed to fighting the so-called “three evils”, it was also committed to discarding international “double standards”, settling disputes through “mutual understanding” and respecting the rights of all countries to “pursue particular models of development and formulate domestic and foreign policies independently and participate in international affairs on an equal basis”. \(^ {104}\)

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\(^{103}\) Torbakov, "The West, Russia, and China in Central Asia: What Kind of Game Is Being Played in the Region?,” 30.

\(^{104}\) See Clarke, "China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization,” 130.
declaration was a clear slap to US regional ambitions, and was a major endorsement for Russia and China’s pursuit of a multilateral international political order.

Iran also displayed considerable enthusiasm at the prospect of joining the SCO, and the potential the organisation offered to shield it from American containment efforts. In 2005, Iran, along with India, Pakistan, and Mongolia were given observer status, much to the delight of its political leadership. Under President Ahmadinejad, Iran used its observer status to rail against American influence in the region, and pushed for membership within the grouping on an almost annual basis, demonstrating the “urgency of Tehran’s desire to join an institutionalised alliance”, and assist it in further increasing its regional influence, while undermining American containment efforts. Iran’s anti-US stance found a sympathetic audience, particularly in Moscow, and it seemed only a matter of time before Iran would be included in the SCO as a fully-fledged member. However, the similar patterns which had undermined Iran’s regional integration prior to 9/11 again raised their ugly heads. Russia, China, and most of the other SCO members rejected Iran’s numerous efforts to join the SCO, stranding its dream of becoming further integrated within Central Asia’s political and security structures. Iran’s nuclear program and its hostile relationship with the United States were key sticking points. In 2013, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov declared in the most strident terms that the SCO members would not allow Iran into the organisation if this also meant defending it against the United States, a proposition which he labelled as “moronic”. Chinese elites were also ultimately opposed to Iran’s accession to the SCO. Beijing did not want the organisation

107 Tajikistan was the only state that had publicly supported Iran’s accession to the SCO. See Stephen Blank, “Iran and the SCO: A Match Made in Dushanbe or in Moscow?,” Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Analyst (April 30, 2008). http://old.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/4847, accessed December 17, 2013.

108 Russian Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov quoted in ibid.
to be perceived as an anti-American bloc of states, and preferred to avoid stoking further conflict with the United States, which was overwhelmingly its most important trading partner.\textsuperscript{109}

2.8 Obama and Iran

The setbacks the Bush administration faced in Central Asia coincided with numerous American policy and military failures in Iraq and in Afghanistan. In the final years of his presidency, Bush had overseen a weakening of US international prestige, a noticeable degradation of American power, and domestic economic weakening, which had placed the United States on the verge of financial collapse.\textsuperscript{110} The Bush administration’s aggressive and overly-ambitious foreign policy brought into sharp relief the limits of American power, and the inability of the United States to fully meet its foreign policy goals. Recognising this, newly-elected American President Barack Obama (2009-present) sought to reorientate American foreign policy, placing a much smaller emphasis upon unilateralism, and using American military capabilities to bring about change in the international system. Obama favoured the status quo, and sought to avoid proselytising about the need to import liberal democracy to apparently backward regions such as Central Asia.\textsuperscript{111} Furthermore, Obama attempted to highlight a much more pragmatic, conciliatory, and cooperative international relations stance in the hope of avoiding conflict with major powers such as China and Russia, who had resisted some of Bush’s

\textsuperscript{109} This became clear in 2006, when Russia approved and China refused to veto the referral of Iran’s nuclear program to the United Nations Security Council. Iran’s failure to comply with IAEA demands, and its rejection of Russian proposals to end the nuclear impasse had isolated Iran, and exasperated elites in both Beijing and in Moscow. For discussion see Mark N. Katz, “Putin, Ahmadinejad and the Iranian Nuclear Crisis,” \textit{Middle East Policy} 13, no. 4 (2006): 125-31.

\textsuperscript{110} Smith, \textit{Power in the Changing Global Order}, 92.

more truculent agendas. In doing so, Obama hoped to find support from both of these states on seemingly intractable issues such as Iran’s nuclear program.

In respect to Iran, Obama promoted the vital need for dialogue between these two implacable foes, and consistently declared his determination to end the 30 years of hostility which existed between Tehran and Washington. Unlike his predecessor, who refused to “speak to evil”, Obama pledged to engage with Iran, and throughout the opening stages of his presidency he attempted to reach out to Iran and to engage in substantive dialogue. In particular, Obama sought to negotiate a cessation of Iran’s disputed nuclear program. However, within the Obama administration were a number of influential figures who opposed negotiating with Iran, in particular US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who bristled at the idea of making concessions to, or engaging in dialogue with, Tehran. Furthermore, Obama’s overtures were considered disingenuous by Iran’s leadership, who noted that despite the rhetoric, his administration remained overwhelmingly committed to economic and political sanctions. Instead of renewed dialogue, Iran’s relations with the United States continued to be characterised by


113 Obama’s attempts to gain support from China and Russia were met with mixed results. See Herb Keinon, “China, Russia Support Iran Sanctions,” The Jerusalem Post, May 20, 2010.


115 Gerges, "The Obama Approach to the Middle East," 301; Akbarzadeh, Iran: From Engagement to Containment, 163; ibid.

116 During the presidency of Ahmadinejad, Iran had made great strides in developing its nuclear program, and Iran had defied numerous UN resolutions to halt the enrichment of uranium and to provide further clarification over some of the more concerning elements of its program.

acrimony.118 Under pressure from key interest groups within his own country, and internationally by a number of states who had grown increasingly alarmed by Iranian President Ahmadinejad’s aggressive rhetoric towards Israel, Obama’s policies towards Iran quickly shifted from that of conciliation to confrontation, expanding its sanctions efforts, and declaring that all options—including military operations—were on the table.119 Although the United States had built up an impressive array of sanctions upon Iran since the 1980s, often such sanctions found little support internationally, even among the United States’ own allies in Europe and in Asia. In particular, European states often questioned the efficacy of sanctions, and were unwilling to hurt their own economic and political interests in Iran.120 However, under Obama, the United States was able to gain considerable international consensus and support for what became the most expansive set of sanctions ever imposed upon Iran. These sanctions included the tightening of restrictions on the ability for private firms and financial institutions to conduct business

118 Ahmadinejad’s blistering anti-Israeli rhetoric, and nationalistic hubris relating to Iran’s nuclear program caused great concern internationally, and within pro-Israeli elements of American domestic politics. Furthermore, key administration figures such as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton were reticent to engage in dialogue with Iran out of fear it could damage the US’ relations with the Arab Gulf states. The hardening of the US stance towards Iran grew following the 2009 Iranian election crackdown on the so-called ‘Green Movement’, and Iran’s apparent influence over non-state actors during the Arab Spring. See Louis Charbonneau, "In New York, Defiant Ahmadinejad Says Israel Will Be "Eliminated," Reuters (September 24, 2012). http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/09/24/us-un-assemble-ahmadinejad-idUSBRE88N0HF20120924, accessed December 18, 2013; John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, "The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy," Middle East Policy 13, no. 3 (2006): 29-87; Kasra Naji, Ahmadinejad: The Secret History of Iran’s Radical Leader (London: I.B. Taurus, 2008) 207-255; Hunter, Iran’s Foreign Policy 33-78; Suzanne Maloney, "Obama’s Counterproductive New Iran Sanctions " Foreign Affairs 5(2012): 1-3.

119 At a meeting of the pro-Israeli AIPAC lobby in Washington D.C. in 2012, President Obama declared: “Iran’s leaders should have no doubt about the resolve of the United States, just as they should not doubt Israel’s sovereign right to make its own decisions about what is required to meet its security needs. I have said that when it comes to preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, I will take no options off the table, and I mean what I say.” See Barak Ravid, "Obama: All Options Remain on the Table to Prevent a Nuclear Iran," Haaretz, March 4, 2012.

with Iran, sanctions upon Iran’s oil sector, and further freezes upon Iran’s foreign assets.\textsuperscript{121}

In the face of these challenges, Iran leaned heavily upon Russia and China, hoping that both states could undermine and limit the impact of these sanctions. While Russia attempted to oppose sanctions and weaken and dilute UN resolutions relating to Iran’s nuclear program, it also generally went along with the United States and its Western allies; Russia would vacillate between supporting and opposing sanctions in an attempt to gain concessions from the West over other interests of greater concern, often using the “Iran issue” as a pawn in larger geopolitical games.\textsuperscript{122} As noted by Katz, Russia’s actions were “designed to convey to Tehran that Moscow can protect Iran from the West if Tehran cooperates with Russia—but also that Russia can side with the West against Iran, if Tehran does not cooperate with it”.\textsuperscript{123} In a similar fashion, China engaged in a delicate balancing act between maintaining its relations with the United States, while continuing to pursue its economic interests in Iran. China in effect took a “middle ground approach”, opposing unilateral sanctions imposed by the United States while insisting that Iran comply with the rules and obligations of international organisations such as the IAEA.\textsuperscript{124} In essence, both states opposed any form of military action against Iran, however, neither state was ever willing to fully stand up for Iran in the international arena, and in the process jeopardise more important economic and political relations involving the United States.


\textsuperscript{122} Hunter, \textit{Iran's Foreign Policy}, 103-16.


Russia and China’s inability, and at times unwillingness, to oppose sanctions upon Iran, and the growing international consensus that Iran had to be punished for its apparent intransigence in relation to its nuclear program, placed Tehran in a diabolical position, and only further isolated it from regional and international affairs. The increased sanctions had a crippling impact upon an already weakened Iranian economy. By May 2013, Iranian oil exports had fallen to only 700,000 barrels per day, compared to an average 2.2 million barrels per day in 2011. In January 2013, Iran’s oil minister declared that sanctions were costing Iran between $4 billion and $8 billion per month in lost export revenues. This loss of revenue, and Iran’s inability to access international finance and banking systems, caused Iran’s currency, the Rial, to lose almost two-thirds of its value, creating massive hardship within Iran.  

The debilitating impact of sanctions on Iran’s economy was acknowledged by President Ahmadinejad, who declared in 2012 that the cumulative weight of unilateral American and international sanctions amounted to “the heaviest economic onslaught on a nation in history…every day all our banking and trade activities and our agreements are being monitored and blocked”.

By the end of Ahmadinejad’s presidential term in 2013, Iran’s foreign policy in Central Asia was also suffering under the weight of sanctions. The attempts to isolate Iran from Central Asia continued in earnest under the Obama administration, which was made clear in 2012 by Assistant Secretary of State for Central and South Asia Robert Blake. When asked about Iran’s potential to integrate economically with the region, Blake declared:

Let me just say that consistent with America’s sanctions on Iran, the United States is encouraging all of the countries of the region to avoid trade and other transactions with the government of Iran in order to pressure Iran to engage with the

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international community about its concerns about Iran’s nuclear program. We believe there are some very good alternatives.\(^{127}\)

Apart from these continued efforts to isolate Iran from Central Asia, the region did not constitute an important enough market for Iranian goods, and could never make up the shortfall in trade with countries that had once imported Iran’s oil. Although nearly all of the Central Asian republics openly declared their opposition to military action against Iran,\(^{128}\) and remained committed to undertaking trade with Iran, nonetheless all were forced to reassess aspects of their relations with Tehran. For instance, Turkmenistan cancelled a contract offered to an Iranian company to construct a railway line to Kazakhstan worth almost $700 million in the face of what Turkmen President, Gurbanguli Berdymukhamedov, cited as “Iranian economic problems”.\(^{129}\) Furthermore, Iran, touting its ability to circumvent sanctions, signed a number of cooperation agreements with countries such as Tajikistan and Kazakhstan, proposing the construction of large-scale infrastructure projects, which at the time of writing are still not beyond the planning stages due to Iran’s inability to access key investment funds.\(^{130}\) The Central

\(^{127}\) Unfortunately all of the alternatives offered by the United States to the Central Asian republics either went through politically unstable Afghanistan, or via expensive routes across the Caspian Sea. See Robert Blake quoted in Joshua Kucera, "U.S.: We're for the New Silk Road – If It Bypasses Iran," Eurasianet (March 29, 2012). http://www.eurasianet.org/node/65200, accessed December 18, 2013. See also Arzu Naghiyev, "Central Asia as Iran’s Saviour,” Trend News Agency (November 2, 2012). http://en.trend.az/news/politics/2083404.html, accessed December 17, 2013; Olcott, "Iran’s Unavoidable Influence over Afghanistan’s Future.”. Furthermore the impact of sanctions was acknowledged by Iranian officials. For instance a trade expert within the Iran Trade Promotion Organisation, declared that the sanctions had constrained Iran’s influence in Central Asia, leading to a stagnation in Iranian trade. Trade Expert. Recorded interview with author, Tehran, May 1, 2013.


\(^{129}\) Naghiyev, "Central Asia as Iran’s Saviour”.

\(^{130}\) As noted by a prominent Tajik political commentator, the chances of Iran fulfilling its proposal to construct an ‘industrial city’ in Tajikistan, with a proposed cost of $2 billion seemed highly unlikely in the face of ongoing US sanctions. See Alexander Sodiqov, "Iran's Latest Investment Pledge Raises Questions in Tajikistan," The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Analyst (March 7, 2012). http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/field-reports/item/12463-field-reports-caci-analyst-2012-3-7-art-12463.html, accessed December 17, 2013.
Asian republics believed that it was imperative for Iran to improve its relations with the United States, which would ultimately improve their economic prospects and lessen regional tensions.\(^{131}\) Unfortunately under the presidency of Ahmadinejad such prospects were remote, and Iran remained an isolated state unable to fully reach its political and economic potential within a region where it should have had a larger economic, cultural, and political presence.

### 2.9 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the regional and international constraints which have consistently held Iran back from fully participating economically, politically, and culturally within Central Asia. Iran’s resistance to the current international order, in particular its unwillingness and inability to engage in a “normal” relationship with the United States, has had a damaging impact upon Iran’s national interests, and has undermined its ability to fully benefit from its geographical and political position within the region. In effect, Iran’s relations with the United States have filtered down and affected almost every aspect of Iran’s interactions and relations with Central Asia. Although the Central Asian republics have had political and economic relations with Iran since the end of the Cold War, these relations have been largely circumscribed by the regional and international isolation imposed on Iran by the United States. Furthermore, the behaviour of key regional states Russia and China has also further undermined Iran’s foreign policy agendas, and led Iran to be consistently sidelined from regional economic and political institutions. The ambition of Iranian political elites for their state to become a vital link “between east and west” has, despite more than 20 years of relations with the Central Asian republics, remained a pipe dream. Instead of an economic and political lynchpin in Central Asia, Iran has instead overwhelmingly been used as a pawn by both its regional “allies” and rivals alike.

Chapter Three: The Historical Context of Iranian-Tajik Relations

A popular narrative that has developed among Iranian and Tajik political elites throughout the post-Soviet period is the notion that Iran and Tajikistan are tied together by the deep bonds of a mutual culture, history, and language spanning thousands of years. Such narratives and themes have formed a significant presence in Iran’s foreign policy approach, and in the process have been used to legitimate many of Iran’s political, cultural, and economic initiatives in post-Soviet Tajikistan. While such narratives have indeed become popular, particularly in the inter-state political discourse carried out between Iranian and Tajik governing elites, rarely have these so-called deep historical and cultural bonds been placed under the strain of critical analysis.

This chapter seeks to take a nuanced view towards this historical narrative, and instead contends that relations between Iranians and Tajiks prior to 1991 were largely characterised by long periods of disjuncture, apathy, and distrust on both a societal and political level. In forwarding this position, this chapter will outline the historical, political, and cultural inter-linkages between Iran and Tajikistan, beginning with the shared foundational myth of a unified Iranian civilisation, which concluded with the fall of the Samanid dynasty. The chapter will then move onto Iran’s very limited societal, cultural, and political interactions with the people and land now known as the Tajiks and Tajikistan throughout the rules of the Turkic dynasties, the Russians, and the Soviets. This chapter will highlight that the Iranian-Tajik state and societal relationship is very much a new phenomenon, which has its roots more in the political exigencies of the past 30 years rather than in the depths of a 1000-year historical past.

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1 This chapter’s discussion of historical relations between Iranians and Tajiks during the Middle Ages and the Russian colonial era focuses considerably upon the Emirate of Bukhara, where the majority of Tajiks resided. It is acknowledged, however, that Tajiks lived all over Central Asia, including in the Khanates of Khokand and Khiva, as well as independent principalities in the Pamir mountains.
3.1 Iran’s Medieval Links to Tajikistan and Central Asia

Iran’s political and cultural links with Central Asia encompasses a long and complex history, which stokes a fervent sense of nationalist pride among Iranians to the present day. It is generally agreed among scholars that Iranians constituted Central Asia’s first sedentary inhabitants, speaking eastern variations of the Iranian language group. Early Iranian peoples developed primitive forms of state organisation revolving around oases and irrigated areas, with the establishment of cities at key intersections of trade. The establishment of these cities gradually took place throughout the sixth century B.C.E., mostly in the southern rim of Central Asia—or Transoxiana—eventually leading to the foundation of some of the world’s most powerful medieval empires. Within Central Asia, the Iranian Achaemenid (550-331 B.C.E.), Arsacid (247 B.C.E. - 224 C.E.), and Sassanian (224-641 C.E.) empires ruled over vast swathes of land and peoples. However, Iran’s political rule and cultural influence in Central Asia declined dramatically following the waves of nomadic Turkic and Mongol tribes and confederations that entered the region from the northern steppes beginning in the sixth century.

These heterogeneous Turkic and Mongol cultural and political entities dominated the region’s political history without exception until the late nineteenth century. However, Iranian culture survived and was in many respects reinvigorated by the Muslim Arab invasions of the seventh century. The Muslim Arab invasions introduced an Iranian literary and linguistic renaissance, particularly within Transoxiana. It was in this region that the modern Iranian language developed in the form of Farsi-e Dari, and superseded

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older Iranian languages and eastern vernaculars. This process of Iranian cultural ascendency was aided by the fact that Iranians took over the administration and governorship of the new provinces placed under Arab control, and over time much of the populace of the region we now know as Tajikistan adopted Farsi-e Dari. Tajiks trace their origins to the pre-Islamic eastern Iranian-speaking populations, who had converted to Islam and adopted the Western Iranian idiom of Persian following the Arab conquests of the seventh century.

Iranian cultural and linguistic dominance within the territories of modern Tajikistan was solidified in the ninth century, during the rule of the Samanid dynasty (819-999 C.E.). The Samanids owed their allegiance to the Abbasid caliph located in Baghdad, and from their capital, Bukhara, the Samanids established a strong centralised state over the lands of Tajikistan and the surrounding region. The Samanids oversaw the flourishing of art, culture, and science, and the continuation and extension of Iranian linguistic and cultural influence in the Central Asian region following the introduction of Islam. The Samanid dynasty ended with their defeat at the hands of the Karakhanids, a Turkic tribal confederacy, in 999 C.E. This defeat re-instigated Turkic political ascendency, and weakened the Iranian ethnic element in Transoxania and Central Asia. The process of Turkicisation reached its zenith with the Uzbek Turks, who entered the region from the Kipchak Steppe in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, and dominated

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6 Ibid.
9 Furthermore, Samanid rule can be considered a critical juncture in broader Iranian history due to the success the Samanids had in reviving older pre-Islamic forms of Iranian rule and administration, and in the link this dynasty provided to later Iranian dynasties, which re-emerged in the sixteenth century Middle East. See Gene R. Garthwaite, The Persians, (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 125.
10 Hunter, Iran and the World, 211
Transoxiana until the encroachment into the region of the Tsarist Russian Empire beginning in the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{11}

The modern importance of Samanid rule is clear in the sense that many Tajiks view this comparatively short period of history as Tajikistan’s golden age, and the beginning of Tajik “nationhood”. The Samanids are seen not only as the Tajik nation’s golden age, but also, according to contemporary Tajik historians, as the pinnacle of greater Islamic civilisation. As set out by Horák, according to Tajik academicins, the Samanids are “the source of all the cultural acquisitions of early modern Europe. In addition, in its time this state was regarded as the strongest on earth. In contemporary Tajik historiography the empire of the Samanids appears also as a model of governance—as an effective, well-ordered, and simple state structure. Thus, the destruction of the Samanid state by the Turko-Mongols meant the destruction of the “most advanced culture of Turanian (Aryan) civilization.”\textsuperscript{12} A number of popular historians, and even Tajikistan’s President Emomali Rahmon, openly postulate the idea that the Samanid dynasty constitutes the first Tajik state.\textsuperscript{13} Just as the Samanid period is Tajikistan’s golden age, in a similar manner Iranians also view the Samanids through a nationalist prism, considering this dynasty to be saviours of Persian culture and literature, and more importantly as strong opponents of Arab rule and overlordship.\textsuperscript{14} However, these nationalist and thoroughly modern characterisations brush over what is a complicated history, and the Samanids should neither be treated as the progenitors of the Tajik nation, or an example of Iranian cultural superiority over the “inferior” Turks. Rather, this period should be considered as the last

\textsuperscript{11} Subtelny, “The Symbiosis of Turk and Tajik,” 49.


\textsuperscript{14} Homa Katouzian, \textit{The Persians: Ancient, Medieval and Modern Iran} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 84.
period of Iranian cultural, political and social dominance in Central Asia, and one in which the growing symbiosis and unity of Islamic and Iranian culture took place.\textsuperscript{15}

3.2 The Rule of the Turks

Following the fall of the Samanids in the tenth century until Tsarist Russia’s entrance into the region in the nineteenth century, a series of Turkic dynasties ruled over much of the current borders of present-day Tajikistan and wider Central Asia. Iranian cultural influence remained and carried on in the form of a sedentary Sunni Islamic, urban-based, strata of merchants, artisans, and tradesmen who continued to speak the Persian language and retained their ancient cultural mores despite the incursion of Turkic nomadic groups. Rather than keeping an ethnically and culturally direct connection to the region’s long history of Iranian rule that ended with the Samanids, these sedentary Central Asian Iranians gradually mixed with their Turkic neighbours who also adopted the Persian language, Islamic values, and sedentary way of life. It is these Central Asian Persian-speakers that we contemporarily refer to as the Tajiks. Whilst it is the case that this sedentary Iranian population assimilated a plethora of Turkic nomadic groups and entities, particularly in eastern Bukhara where there were large populations of Iranians, the admixture of populations and social groups was not just a one-way process, and the complex interactions between these two peoples makes it extraordinarily difficult to draw neat lines between Turkic and Iranian cultures within Central Asia. Furthermore, if viewing Central Asia as a whole, the consistent and large influx and dominance of Turkic nomads into what were the sedentary domains of Iranian peoples did shift the political, ethnic, and linguistic composition of Central Asia in a decidedly Turkic fashion, which both minimised and hybridised the influence of Iranian culture to differing extents.\textsuperscript{16}


\textsuperscript{16} Nourzhanov and Bleuer, \textit{Tajikistan: A Political and Social History}, 33.
Of the plethora of Turkic tribes and confederacies that ruled over Central Asia, the Uzbeks were among the most dominant. Uzbek khans and later emirs established their centre of power in the lands of Bukhara and Transoxiana,¹⁷ the historical centres of Iranian political culture in the Central Asian region. Uzbek rule throughout the sixteenth to early twentieth century is considered by a number of scholars to be a period characterised by economic backwardness, cultural conservatism, and political despotism.¹⁸ According to Becker, nineteenth century Bukhara was a classic example of traditional or pre-modern societies, with the Emirate’s “economic, social, and political systems, their technology, and the intellectual attitudes of their rulers showed no qualitative change from the tenth century”.¹⁹ Although Bukhara was economically and politically backward when placed into comparative perspective with its Islamic neighbours of the time, the Persian empire and the Ottoman empire, Bukhara did symbolise the ethnic and religious heterogeneity and dynamism of the Central Asian region.²⁰ The ruling Uzbeks were joined by large populations of Turkmen, and Tajiks,²¹ as well as smaller populations of Jews, Kyrgyz, 

¹⁷ It should be noted that three dynasties ruled the Khanate and later Emirate of Bukhara during this period. The first were the Sheibanids (1500-1598 C.E., descendants of the Mongol Khans. According to Ilkhamov, the origin of the ethnonym Uzbek “probably originates from the name of Uzbek-khan (1312-1340 C.E., the ninth Overlord of Djuchi House (Chengiz-Khan’s elder son)”. See Alisher Ilkhamov, "Archaeology of Uzbek Identity," Central Asian Survey 23, no. 3 (2004): 291. The Sheibanids oversaw the assimilation and merger of a number of Turkic and Mongol tribal groups and were eventually succeeded by the Astarkhanid dynasty (1598-1740 C.E.). In 1740, Nadir Shah (1736-1747 C.E.) founder of the Persian Afsharid Dynasty (1736-1796 C.E.), gained control of southern Central Asia for a brief period, defeating the Astarkhanids and replacing the dynasty with one of his protégés, Muhammad Rahim. Rahim adopted the honorific of ‘Emir’, inaugurating the Manghit Dynasty which ruled until the abolition of the Bukharan Emirate by the Soviets in 1920. See Akiner, Islamic Peoples of the Soviet Union, 270-71.


¹⁹ Becker, Russia’s Protectorates, 11.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ According to Becker, under the Russian protectorate Uzbeks accounted for 55-60 percent of Bukhara’s population. Tajiks formed a large minority of 30 percent, and the Turkmen made up 5-10 percent of the population. Becker, Russia’s Protectorates, 7.
Hindus, and Arabs, as well as significant numbers of Shi’ite Iranian slaves who were brought to Bukhara from Iran’s eastern regions, and who played a major role in Bukharan armies and in Bukhara’s civil administration. The Persian-speaking Tajiks were integral to the commercial functioning of Bukhara, and made up a large majority of Bukhara’s sedentary population of artisans, merchants, and peasants. While most Tajiks were adherents of Sunni Islam, there were also major populations of eastern Iranian-speaking Shi’ite Ismailis in the mountainous regions to the east of Bukhara, who largely retained their autonomy and independence from the Turkic-dominated steppes and urban centres.

Despite the overlordship of the Turkic Uzbeks, Iranian culture and language was a pervasive influence within the sedentary rungs of domestic Bukharan society that also carried over into the realm of the ruling elite, where Uzbek rulers patronised and promoted Iranian culture, and conducted the everyday tasks of governance in the Persian

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24 It is believed that Ismailism entered the Pamirs from missionaries who had travelled to the region from Iran. According to Pirumshoev: “A tradition to which nearly all authorities on the Pamirs refer, in 1581 four brothers [Sayyid Muhammad Isfahani also known as Shah Kashan, Sayyid Shah Malang, Sayyid Shah Khamush, and Shah Burhan-i Wali] dressed as dervishes arrived in Shughnan from Isfahan … each of the four came to choose his own place to live within the country.” The four brothers went on to become rulers of different districts within the Pamirs and converted the local population to Ismailism. While there were periods in which the Pamirs came under the rule of the neighbouring Turkic dynasties it is widely believed that the descendents of the four brothers had retained overlordship of the region up until the 1880s. See H. S. Pirumshoev and A. H. Dani, “History of Civilizations of Central Asia: Development in Contrast: From the Sixteenth to the Mid-Nineteenth Century,” ed. Chahryar Adle and Irfan Habib (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 2003), 229; Frank Bliss, *Social and Economic Change in the Pamirs (Gorno-Badakhshan, Tajikistan): Translated from German by Nicola Pacult and Sonia Guss with Support of Tim Sharp* (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), 62.
While retaining their nomadic roots and forms of identification, the Uzbek elites sought to hold onto much of the Iranian administrative and bureaucratic practices emanating from the region’s ancient history of Iranian rule. While many of the originally nomadic Uzbeks became semi-sedentary or sedentary, and adopted Perso-Islamic cultural mores and lifestyles, Manz contends that the politically active and upper echelons of Uzbek society “had an interest in preserving a separate identity and in maintaining the tribal affiliation which secured them a place within the ruling stratum”, with these groups forming the basis of the Uzbek military and ruling classes. Uzbek who did adopt sedentary lifestyles of the Persian-speaking urban populations were often identified as Sarts.

The etymology of the term Sart has incited considerable controversy within academia. For instance, according to Subtelny,

When the nomadic Uzbeks came into Central Asia from the Kipchak Steppe in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the term Uzbek gained currency alongside the older nomadic self-designation “Turk”, which was now reserved for the pre-Uzbek Turkic tribes, some of whom already made the transition to semi-sedentarism and even sedentarism. The Uzbeks who were nomads, clearly distinguished between themselves and their sedentary subject population whom they usually referred to as Sart (also Tajik). Like Tat and Tajik, it too became a

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27 See V. Bartold, cited in C.E. Bosworth, Encyclopedia of Islam, Vol IX (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), 66-68. Ilkhamov neatly sums up the at times confusing and heterogeneous definitions of ‘Sarts’ declaring that the label and category Sarts was a ‘social’ rather than ‘ethnic’ category and that in “some cases those former Dashti-Kipchak Uzbeks and Chaghatay Turks and Turko-Mongols who switched to a settled lifestyle and lost their nomadic identity are classified as ‘Sarts.’ In other instances, they are seen as Turkified Tajiks. In any case, the notion ‘Sart’ combines both ethnic and class attributes. Sarts are, as a rule, urban inhabitants engaged in craftsmanship, trade and in middle level administrative and educational activity. The percentage of clergy, supervisors of cults and law enforcement officials is also relatively high among them”. See Ilkhamov, “Archaeology of Uzbek identity,” 303-304.
derogatory term, even acquiring a contemptuous popular etymology: “yellow dog” (sart it).  

Going even further, noted Soviet historian Bartold, believes that Sart was often used interchangeably with the term Tajik prior to the entrance of the Uzbeks into Transoxiana. Because Muslim Iranian-speaking populations of the Central Asian region lived a mainly sedentary lifestyle, nomadic Mongol-Turkic tribes would refer to all sedentary populations as Sarts, no matter their language or ethnicity. Following the entrance of the Uzbeks into Transoxiana in the sixteenth century, Sart became synonymous with the label Tajik, referring to Persian-speaking sedentary populations, and sat in sharp contradistinction, to the term Uzbek, which referred to the Turkic-speaking nomadic and semi-nomadic populations. The long, drawn-out process of cultural inter-mingling and co-habitation which occurred between Uzbeks and other sedentary populations, in particular the Persian-speaking Tajik and Iranian populations, led to what Bartold considers a “general trend toward Turkicisation of the indigenous Iranian populations”. Furthermore, Bartold goes on to declare that this dynamic process of population admixture had by the nineteenth century led to the identification of Sart shifting from being synonymous with Tajik to only referring to Turkic-speaking or bilingual town dwellers of Uzbek and Turkic origin. A Tajik by this time was reserved only for Persian-speakers. However it is Ilkhamov who neatly sums up the at times confusing and heterogeneous definitions of Sarts, declaring that the label was a “social” rather than “ethnic” category, and that in some cases those former Dashti-Kipchak Uzbeks and Chaghatay Turks and Turko-Mongols who switched to a settled lifestyle and lost their nomadic identity are classified as Sarts. In other instances, they are seen as Turkified Tajiks. In any case, the notion Sart combines both ethnic and class attributes. Sarts [were], as a rule, urban inhabitants engaged in craftsmanship, trade, and in middle level

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28 Subtelny, "The Symbiosis of Turk and Tajik." 49.
administrative and educational activity. The percentage of clergy, supervisors of cults and law enforcement officials is also relatively high among them.\textsuperscript{30}

Although there were significant political, cultural and linguistic commonalities and, as noted above, admixture, that existed between the populations of Persia and Bukhara in the centuries that followed the fall of the Samanid dynasty, the Shi’ite-Sunni sectarian divide, instigated by the adoption of Shi’ism as Iran’s state religion by the Safavids in 1502 C.E., contributed to deep hostility and the absence of fruitful and productive ties between the populations and governments of Bukhara and Iran. Sectarian rivalry, distrust, and conflict characterised ties between Bukhara and Iran from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, with sectarian-fuelled atrocities, massacres, and plunder committed by both sides throughout this period.\textsuperscript{31} Furthermore, intermittent invasions by Turkmen nomads and Uzbek warlords wreaked havoc upon Iran’s north-eastern borderlands, and placed significant pressure and hardship upon Iran’s sedentary populations, particularly in Khorasan.

It is estimated that tens of thousands of Shi’ite Iranian slaves were carried off and sold into slave markets throughout Bukhara\textsuperscript{32}, a practice that was legally justified by the Bukharan Sunni lawyers who proclaimed that the Shi’ite Iranians were infidels and

\textsuperscript{30} Ilkhamov, "Archaeology of Uzbek Identity," 303-04.


\textsuperscript{32} It was reported by Baron Von Meyendorff, who had been sent by the Russian Tsarist government to Bukhara to secure the release of Russian slaves in 1820, that there were between 25-40,000 Persian slaves within the Bukharan Emirate alone of an estimated population of 2.5 million people. The remainder of the population was made up of Uzbeks (1.5 million), Tajiks (650,000), Turcomans (200,000), Arabs (50,000), Persians (40,000), Kalmyks (20,000), Kyrgyz and Karakalpaks (6,000), Jews (4,000), Afghans (4,000), Lesghiz (2,000) and Bohemians (2,000). See Carl Hermann Scheidler, A Journey from Orenburg to Bokhara in the Year 1820, Calcutta, 1870, 60-61 and G. Meyendorff, Voyage à Boukhara fait en 1820. (Paris, 1826). Further to this estimate, and quoting a Persian emissary, English traveller Mary Holdsworth stated that Persian slaves accounted for half of the settled population of Bukhara’s neighbour, the khanate of Khiva, in the mid-nineteenth century. The khanate had at this time an estimated population of around 700,000 people. See Mary Holdsworth, Turkestan in the Nineteenth Century: a brief history of the khanates of Bukhara, Kokand and Khiva (Oxford: St. Antony’s College, 1959), 21–2.
apostates. According to Germanov, Bukharans—both Tajik and Uzbek alike—regarded Shi’ite Iranians as “unpleasant and contemptible people. It was considered disgraceful in Bukhara to have any links with the Persians…The society despised the Persians and they were like pariahs.” Burton further contends that this hatred for the “heretical” Shi’ite Iranians was at such a level that the Sunni Bukharans:

That went to Iran brought their friends pieces of underwear or skeins of cotton dipped in Iranian blood as souvenirs. If they had to stay for any length of time on business they were even known to have committed suicide on their return, because they felt thoroughly unclean as a result of their visit. But just as Sunni theologians (‘ulama) would order them to “kill and destroy...those who gave up the Sunni doctrine, accepted the abominable Shi’a rite and reviled the three Caliphs”, the Iranian populace would make a point of cursing the revered Caliph ‘Umar loudly in the presence of visitors from the khanate, in order to provoke them into a fight.

At various times hatred and violence towards Shi’ite Iranian populations within Bukhara spiralled out of control, particularly in the early twentieth century when Iranians began to gain real influence over the ruling emirs, and control over the governing organs of the weak Bukharan state. The ascendency of the Iranians during this period enraged the

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33 According to Hopkins: “The minority status of slavers’ victims was as much a reflection of opportunity as of a developed attitude to target religious outsiders. While there was a sophisticated body of Islamic jurisprudence regarding the treatment and sectarian identity of slaves, the dissonance between theory and practice was obviously great. This dissonance increased the further one moved from established religious centres, such as Bukhara. It is therefore little surprise that Khiva, without an established, politically powerful community of ulama, emerged as the centre of the Central Asian slave trade.” See B.D. Hopkins, “Race, Sex and Slavery: ‘Forced Labour’ in Central Asia and Afghanistan in the Early 19th Century,” Modern Asian Studies 42, Iss. 4, (2008), 645


36 In March 1877, a bloody conflict between Persians on one side and Uzbeks and Tajiks on the other erupted over the appointment of Persians to administrative positions within the Bukharan government. It is believed that many were killed in this conflict, and 315 were wounded. In another sectarian conflict, which broke out in January 1910, more than 1000 people in the city of Bukhara were thought to have been killed in violent street battles which took place between Persians, and Uzbeks and Tajiks. See Germanov, “Shiite-Sunnite Conflict,” 122 and 129.
citizens of Bukhara, and contributed to significant internal violence and social dislocation. News of repression against Shi’ites in Bukhara, and the brutal invasions conducted by Turkmen nomads and Uzbek warlords upon Iran’s north-eastern borderlands, often incited Iranian authorities to retaliate against their eastern neighbours, feeding a vicious cycle of revenge and violence, which did not completely end until the consolidation of Tsarist Russian rule in Central Asia in the twentieth century.

These bloody and ruthless interactions contributed to the popularisation of the Iranian image of Central Asia not as a domain of past glories, but rather as a land of barbarity and incivility, an image that was in many respects shared by the Bukharans who saw Iran as a land of religious heresy and villainy. Violent hostilities and mutual xenophobia contributed to a decline in trade flows, which had already been heavily impacted following the opening of sea routes that linked Europe with East Asia, and opened the age of European imperialism in the late fifteenth century, eventually ending the economic importance of the so-called “Silk Roads”. Although it is difficult to ascertain the impact on trade of violence and poor relations between the populations of Bukhara and Iran, trade did continue to take place, however this trade was likely to have been on a smaller scale and was frequently interrupted by wars and conflict between Bukhara and Iran.

The biggest impact of the sectarian hostilities which plagued relations between Bukhara and Iran was in the field of cultural exchange. In effect a “confrontation line” had been drawn between these two societies, which hampered social and cultural interchange and contributed to each side excluding more and more of the other’s literary, visual, and other

37 Ibid., 123.


39 Bregel, “Bukhara iv.”


41 Bregel, “Bukhara iv.”
cultural works, thus having a detrimental impact on the cultural and social development of not only Central Asia, but also the eastern provinces of Iran proper. Rulers in both societies saw their respective Islamic sects as a means to assert legitimacy and to ensure social harmony within their territories at the expense of their bilateral relations and economic, social, and cultural contacts. Modern notions of nationalism and ethnic solidarity, and older forms of social organisation such as common linguistic bonds, played very little role in shaping friendly relations between Tajiks and Iranians during the 300-year rule of the Uzbek dynasts. Rather, sectarian solidarity and societal function took precedence over other forms of communal identification, at least on an inter-societal level, hampering Iran’s interactions and contributing to the creation of a religious frontier which effectively separated Iran from Central Asia in general, and the Tajiks in particular.

3.3 Tsarist Russian Control of Central Asia

Intermittent slave raids and inter-societal conflict between Iran and Bukhara were of very little importance to Iran’s rulers when compared to the danger posed by Russian imperial expansion beginning in the late eighteenth century. Moving southwards into Transcaucasia and through Iran’s north-western approaches, Tsarist Russia became a border state and a source of significant Iranian fears, which arguably were only put to rest with the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The colonial encroachment unfolded rapidly in Central Asia, with Tsarist Russia placing vast swathes of territory under its control. Although Bukhara retained nominal independence in the years following its defeat at the hands of Tsarist forces in 1868, its ruling emirs found it increasingly difficult to control even their own domestic affairs

42 Ibid.


against the power of Russia. In the years leading up to the 1917 Bolshevik revolution, Bukhara was a Tsarist Russian protectorate, with its ruling emirs having little control over external affairs and foreign policy.\footnote{Under a protectorate agreement between Russia and the Emir of Bukhara, Russia represented Bukhara in the field of foreign affairs and received a range of economic and political concessions within Bukhara’s territory, see Teresa Rakowska-Harmstone, \textit{Russia and Nationalism in Central Asia – the Case of Tadzhikistan} (Baltimore The Johns Hopkins Press, 1970), 8.} In effect, Iran’s dealings with the peoples and territories of Central Asia—at least on a governmental level—from this point onwards would overwhelmingly be shaped by the strategic and economic interests of Russian policy planners based in St. Petersburg and later Moscow.\footnote{Mikhail Volodarsky, \textit{The Soviet Union and Its Southern Neighbours, Iran and Afghanistan, 1917-1933} (Essex: Frank Cass, 1994), 2; Martin Sicker, \textit{The Bear and the Lion, Soviet Imperialism and Iran} (New York: Praeger, 1988), 15.}

This shift and the ultimate breakdown of Iran’s already tenuous relations with Central Asia were exacerbated by its weakened position throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Forced to sign a string of embarrassing and lopsided treaties, not only Russia but also with a number of other European powers—most notably Great Britain—it became clear that Iran under its Qajar rulers (1785-1925) was a spent force on the brink of collapse. A number of European governments exacted special privileges from Iran under the so-called “Regime of Capitulations”, which included consular jurisdiction, extraterritoriality, and the right to own property, effectively undermining Iran’s sovereignty and freedom of political action within its own borders. As a site of imperial intrigue and competition, the British and Russians “openly and unapologetically” vied for control over Iran’s territories and riches. The inability of Iranian rulers to control their own internal affairs, and Iran’s complete helplessness in the face of the European imperial onslaught, was on display in 1907, when the British and Russians signed a formal agreement which would divide Iran into Russian and British spheres of influence. As noted by Parker, the “resulting spheres of influence in the north and south of Iran, Russian and British respectively, were in effect zones of imperial occupation”.\footnote{John W. Parker, \textit{Persian Dreams}, 2.} Both Russia and
Great Britain consistently attempted to exercise control over the weak, incompetent, and corrupt Iranian government. Under such trying circumstances Iranian rulers showed an almost complete lack of interest in, or ability to shape, events emanating across their eastern borders, viewing Russia’s imperial advance and the solidification of Russian rule in Central Asia as a minor issue in comparison to more pressing issues facing Iran during this chaotic period of Iranian history.  

3.4 Pan-Turkism

Iran’s lack of cultural and political influence within Central Asia was further exacerbated by the immense social and political changes which were taking place in the region throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Bukhara and the Central Asian territories under Russian control were buffeted by a rising sense of Pan-Turkic national consciousness and increased claims for political and cultural reform from the region’s intelligentsia. This process was encouraged by the large number of Tatar Tsarist administrators and interpreters, who had boosted the use of the Chaghatay Turkic language in everyday government communication, and had encouraged the use of the Turkic language in schools and other Central Asian cultural and social institutions at the expense of the Persian language. The presence and influence of Tatars involved in the administration of Central Asia was by no means the only factor behind the rising tide of Pan-Turkic self-awareness. Other influences not indigenous to the Central Asian region were also making their presence felt. In particular, the shock and humiliation felt by Muslim populations throughout the world in the face of European conquest and colonisation had according to Bergne:

[S]timulated a wave of soul searching amongst the intelligentsia of those countries most affected. Muslim thinkers tried to analyse the reasons for the weakness and lack of development of those governments whether Moghul, Ottoman, Egyptian, or North African, which had been defeated by British, French, or in the Caucasus and

49 Ibid.

50 Bergne, The Birth of Tajikistan, 16.
Central Asia, Russian arms, or, like Iran had remained independent but fallen victim to Western influence and manipulation.\textsuperscript{51}

It was in this atmosphere that many Central Asian thinkers turned to the weakened but still powerful Sunni Ottoman empire and the Pan-Turkic ideas that flowed from this empire as a source of inspiration for their reforms, not the perennially weak Persian empire under the rule of the Qajar Shahs.

Turkic intellectuals sought to apply principals of modern education within Russian-controlled areas of Central Asia, and in the politically and culturally conservative territories still under the rule of the emir of Bukhara. These intellectuals promoted an educational reform movement known as Usul-e Jadid, or “new principles”. A Tatar writer, Ismail Gaspirali, stood at the forefront of this movement, promoting the need for a simplified Turkic language to be introduced which would be understandable to all Turkic peoples based on a version of Ottoman Turkish written in the Arabic script.\textsuperscript{52} Furthermore, Gaspirali advocated new methods of teaching in schools to replace the memorisation of the Koran and the Shariat, which had formed the backbone of the region’s Islamic educational system.\textsuperscript{53} The Jadid movement had a major impact in Central Asia, where Tajiks and other Persian-speakers increasingly absorbed the Pan-Turkic ideas this new movement espoused. The Pan-Turkic movement and the Turkic language reforms encouraged by the Jadids were deemed progressive and modern in contrast to that of Persian, the de-facto official language of Bukhara, which embodied the feudal, traditional, and despotic roots the Jadids sought to challenge.\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{52} In the middle of the nineteenth century there were four different written languages in the Muslim lands of Central Asia and Russia, these were Persian, Arabic, and two forms of Turkic. According to Manz, these two Turkic languages were both “distinct from everyday speech and strongly influenced by Persian and Arabic. One Turkic language was Ottoman, used outside the Ottoman Empire primarily in Azerbaijan and the Crimea, and the other was eastern literary Turkic—Turki or Chaghatay—used by most other regions of the Russian Empire, Central Asia and East Turkestan,” Manz, “Historical Background,” 14.

\textsuperscript{53} Rakowska-Harmstone, \textit{Russia and Nationalism}, 16.

\textsuperscript{54} Bergne, \textit{The Birth of Tajikistan}, 18.
language and culture as a despotic link to Central Asia’s feudal past effectively relegated the Persian-speaking Tajiks to a politically inferior position, and further alienated Iranian culture during the early twentieth century.\textsuperscript{55} Pan-Turkic groups and political movements sought to encourage Tajiks to give up their language and culture, furthermore an anti-Iranian subtext often adjoined the Pan-Turkic discourse, which looked on with animosity at the complicated symbiosis which had occurred between Turkic and Iranian peoples throughout Central Asia’s long history of civilisation.\textsuperscript{56} In the Pan-Turkic discourse, the Tajiks of Central Asia were in fact Turkic peoples who had been forced to adopt the Persian language by the region’s rulers, and were not ethnically different from the wider Turkic-speaking population. In the words of the Pan-Turkists,

The Uzbek, Kazakh and Kyrgyz people inhabiting Turkistan are not separate nationalities; they all belong to one great Turkic nation. As for the Tajiks, they basically originate from the Turks and became Tajik only as a result of Iranian influence. This is why the Tajiks are Turks.\textsuperscript{57}

Interestingly many Tajik and other Persian-speaking intellectuals agreed with such characterisations and enthusiastically wrapped themselves in this progressive new movement, seeking to distance themselves and their culture from its historical Iranian roots.\textsuperscript{58}

\textbf{3.5 The Beginnings of Soviet Rule}

In 1916, Central Asians had participated in mass uprisings in response to the Russian colonial authorities’ attempts to conscript Central Asians into wartime auxiliary

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\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 17; Adeeb Khalid, \textit{The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform, Jadidism in Central Asia} (Berkeley University of California Press, 1998), 208.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 210.


\textsuperscript{58} For further discussion, see Bergne, \textit{The Birth of Tajikistan}, 17.
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services.\textsuperscript{59} This uprising and the violence it fed were only a prelude to the wider instability the Central Asian region faced following the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. The revolution led to years of civil war, famine, and hardship for the region’s populations, and the complete reorganisation of Central Asian political and cultural life.\textsuperscript{60} The replacement of Tsarist imperial rule in Central Asia with that of the Soviets was both a complicated and drawn-out process, leading to the extinguishment of the Russian Governorate-General of Turkestan in 1918, and both the Khanate of Khiva and the Emirate of Bukhara in 1920, and to the creation of Soviet Socialist Republics based on ethno-linguistic lines.\textsuperscript{61}

The rise of communism often mixed uneasily with the Pan-Turkic nationalist ideas which had flourished in Central Asia in previous decades. For instance in 1920, Central Asian elites created a new Communist Party of Turkestan whose main aim “was the unification of all the Turkic peoples of Central Asia in a new communist but Turkic state”.\textsuperscript{62} The fiery and somewhat contradictory mix of Pan-Turkic nationalism and communist ideology further marginalised the Tajik language and culture, with Tajiks in the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic not even initially recognised as an indigenous people, despite their large population numbers in the regions of Samarkand, Khojent,

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  \item \textsuperscript{59} For further discussion, see Alexander Garland Park, \textit{Bolshevism in Turkestan, 1917-1927} (Columbia University Press, 1957).
  \item \textsuperscript{60} Between 1918 and 1931 Soviet authorities fought a brutal campaign against the Basmachi, a local guerrilla movement which had formed in response to Soviet political and military offensives in Central Asia. This insurgency took place involving several thousand men in the Ferghana Valley, eastern Bukhara, western Bukhara, and Khorezm. The fighting was particularly costly to Tajik civilians. According to Paul Bergne, Soviet authorities estimated that 40-45 percent of the Tajik population had fled to Afghanistan due to the conflict. See Bergne, \textit{The Birth of Tajikistan}, 52. Furthermore, Shirin Akiner notes that there was a 95 percent reduction in cotton production and 40 percent loss of livestock in Tajikistan during this chaotic period. Shirin Akiner, \textit{Tajikistan: Disintegration or Reconciliation?} (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2001), 22.
  \item \textsuperscript{62} Bergne, \textit{The Birth of Tajikistan}, 21.
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Isfara, and Konibodom. In the new, communist, Bukhara, Tajiks fared no better, even though they formed the majority of the population. On the establishment of the People’s Republic of Bukhara in 1920, Turkic was declared the official language of the republic, and a systematic and conscious effort was made by the local authorities to minimise and downgrade the influence of Iranian and Tajik language and culture. Speaking the Persian language was punished by fines, and anti-Tajik and Iranian activities became the order of the day. According to Bergne, “under this sort of pressure, combined with the influence of Jadid reformists, many Tajiks fell in line and went along with the programme of Turkicisation”.

### 3.6 The Creation of Tajikistan

In 1924, Soviet authorities made the decision to carry out a national delimitation of Central Asia, creating a number of Soviet republics based upon the region’s major ethno-linguistic groups. The delimitation process took place with great speed, with the political and cultural trajectory of the Central Asian region redrawn in radical and at times unforeseen ways. The patchwork of political units which included the People’s

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68 It is beyond the scope of this chapter to delve into the strategic and political reasons behind this national delimitation process. However, it should be noted that this hotly debated subject is largely divided between two scholarly views. The first of these views purports that the delimitation process was largely driven by an “official” Soviet desire to provide the peoples of Central Asia with national self-determination. This view sits in sharp contradistinction with scholars who see this process as strictly driven by the need to “divide and rule” the Central Asian populations and undermine the nascent pan-Turkic and pan-Islamist ideologies which had formed in the region during the early twentieth century. For further discussion, see Haugen, *The Establishment of National Republics in Soviet Central Asia*; Olivier Roy, *The New Central Asia*; Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform, Jadidism in Central Asia*; Rakowska-Harmstone, *Russia and Nationalism in Central Asia – the Case of Tadzhikistan*. 

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Republics of Khorezm and Bukhara were transformed into Soviet Socialist Republics, and together with the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic were divided into newly-conceived federal entities. Kazakh and Kyrgyz populated areas continued to be a part of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (SFSR), but were provided autonomous and later full union status (1936). The Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs) of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan were also formed, and Tajik-populated areas were given autonomous but subordinate political status within the Uzbek SSR as the Tajik Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR). The Tajik ASSR inherited parts of the Samarkand, Fergana, eastern Bukhara, and Pamir regions.69

The inception of the Tajik ASSR in 1924 had however quickly exposed the weakened political position of the Tajiks in relation to the Uzbeks following the national delimitation process. The Tajik ASSR was allocated mountainous, economically marginal, and sparsely-populated regions, which had been devastated by the impacts of the long-running civil war between the communists and the Basmachi.70 Furthermore, large populations of Tajiks were left outside the Tajik ASSR’s borders, with the two traditional centres of Tajik economic and cultural life, Bukhara and Samarkand, falling under the purview of the Uzbek SSR.71 Although it was difficult for the Soviet authorities to build equitable boundaries between Tajiks and Uzbeks, due in no small part to the admixture of populations, and the complex structures of identities which had developed over a period of centuries. It was the sheer inability and unwillingness of the Tajik intelligentsia to adequately advocate on behalf of their “co-ethnics” which was the major factor in shaping the inequitable position in which the Tajiks found themselves following the delimitation process.72 As noted by Masov, Stalin himself had remarked to Bobojan

69 Rakowska-Harmstone, Russia and Nationalism, 26.
70 Arne Haugen, The Establishment of National Republics in Soviet Central Asia, 231 and 152.
71 Haugen contends that 60 percent of the Tajik population remained outside of the Tajik ASSR at the time of the delimitation. See Haugen, The Establishment of National Republic, 149.
72 Haugen expands on this point declaring that “it is fair to say that the Tajik case during the national delimitation was unique. Chiefly, it differed from those of the other groups in that it is virtually impossible
Ghafurov, the First Secretary of the Tajik Communist Party, that it was indeed the ethnic Tajiks who had done the most to block the establishment of a separate Tajik union republic, and a number of the Soviet authorities involved in the delimitation process were astounded by the Tajiks’ unwillingness to insist on the expansion of Tajik territorial and cultural claims. However this unwillingness should not be viewed as being brought about by Tajik naivety, sheer political impotence, or the popular Tajik claim of Uzbek skulduggery and under-handedness. Instead, as convincingly argued by Haugen, the Tajik intelligentsia accepted the delimitation in 1924 due to the fact that they felt a stronger sense of identity with the urban populations of Uzbeks rather than with the so-called “mountain Tajiks” of eastern Bukhara. Thus, Abdulrahim Khojibaev and Chinar Imamov, Tajik members of the delimitation committee (both of whom in later years became staunch Tajik nationalists), had agreed wholeheartedly with the delimitation process, and the prospect that a majority of Tajiks would be left within the Uzbek SSR’s borders. According to Khojibaev, the urban Tajiks of Bukhara and Turkestan were “both economically and otherwise very closely connected with the Uzbeks, and this is the reason why they must remain as a part of the Uzbek republic”. Imamov agreed with such an analysis, declaring that urban Tajiks not only had strong economic links with the Uzbeks but also a shared culture, thus it was best that urban Tajiks remained within the borders of the Uzbek SSR and outside of the purview of the Tajik ASSR.

In the years following the national territorial delimitation process, tension between Uzbek and Tajik elites grew in intensity, with Tajik self-awareness increasingly taking shape in response to perceived cultural and political injustices dealt at the hands of the Uzbek-

73 Bergne, The Birth of Tajikistan, 27 and 52.
dominated governing elite. Tajiks who did find themselves within Uzbek borders were, according to Roy,

the object of a discreet but persistent policy of Uzbekisation. This was launched by F. Khojayev in 1924 and was based on a notion employed in Russification: since the Uzbeks were at a more advanced stage of development (they were already officially a nation in 1924 whereas Tajikistan was only an autonomous republic), it was seen as progressive to declare oneself an Uzbek when one was Tajik.

Uzbek elites were often unwilling to grant the Tajiks their cultural rights, and were negligent in fulfilling the obligations of providing economic development to the Tajik ASSR agreed upon with Soviet authorities during the delimitation process. According to Bergne, there was “ample evidence that the Uzbek party and government was siphoning off for its own use funds and credits sent from Moscow which were expressly earmarked for Tajikistan”. Soviet authorities in Moscow grew increasingly frustrated with this behaviour, and alarmed by the Pan-Turkic nationalist aspirations of the Uzbek SSR’s leaders. The central Soviet authorities desire to undercut and minimise Uzbek hegemony within Central Asia, and the growing sense of alienation among Tajiks, played major roles in influencing the Soviet decision to confer full union status upon Tajikistan in 1929, and led to the re-drawing of Tajikistan’s and Uzbekistan’s borders through the inclusion of the city of Khojand and its surrounding district into the newly-formed Tajik SSR. Although Tajik elites were pleased with this decision, the unwillingness of

75 Bergne, The Birth of Tajikistan, 102.
76 Fayzullah Khojayev was the president of the Bukhara Sovnarkom (1920-24) and was later the president of the Executive Committee of Sovnarkom (the Soviet of People’s Commissars) of the Uzbek SSR up until 1937. See Roy, The New Central Asia, 73.
77 Roy, The New Central Asia, 71.
78 Haugen, The Establishment of National Republic, 159.
79 Bergne, The Birth of Tajikistan, 102.
80 Haugen, The Establishment of National Republic, 159.
81 Rakowska-Harmstone, Russia and Nationalism, 71; Haugen, The Establishment of National Republics, 163.
Moscow to award Tajikistan the ancient centres of shared Tajik and Iranian civilisation, Samarkand and Bukhara, was a hammer blow to Tajik nationalist aspirations, and remained a controversial issue throughout the Soviet period and beyond.82

3.7 Tajikistan – A Model ‘Soviet-Iranian’ State

The need to curtail Uzbek ambitions and temper Tajik anger at real and imagined Uzbek malfeasance were not the only factors behind Moscow’s decision to grant Tajikistan full union status. Another major political factor is also thought to have related to the shifting political dynamics taking place outside of the Soviet Union at the time. In particular, events occurring in bordering Afghanistan, which had been rocked by growing public discontent with the Amanullah, the King of Afghanistan,83 who had been a Soviet sympathiser of sorts, and the rise to power of the staunchly nationalist and anti-communist Reza Shah in Iran, increased the attractiveness of establishing a “Soviet model Iranian state” in Central Asia.84 The export of communism beyond the Soviet Union’s borders was a key objective of Stalin, and a “prerequisite to the definitive triumph of socialism”.85 Tajikistan’s location at the crossroads of Iran, Afghanistan, and British India therefore imbued it with considerable strategic and ideological importance to Soviet authorities in the 1920s.86 Furthermore, Soviet authorities hoped that the common Persian language and culture of Tajikistan, Iran, and parts of Afghanistan and northwest India would eventually become a key platform through which communist ideologies could spread and take root

83 Following the overthrow of the Amanullah in 1928, which briefly brought to power Bacha-i Saqqao, a Tajik, the Soviets flirted with the idea of using what Roy describes as the “Tajik card” to influence events emanating over the USSR’s southern borders. Roy believes that the rise to power of Saqqao had a major influence on the conferment of union status to Tajikistan in 1929. See Roy, The New Central Asia, 67.
84 Rakowska-Harmstone, Russia and Nationalism, 114.
85 Ibid., 115.
86 Ibid.
within the east. In line with such a strategic rationale, Roy contends that “nationalities were created as a function of the principal of the dual bridgehead, the idea being to favour ethnic groups which might serve as a bridgehead to enable the USSR to extend beyond its frontiers, and inversely, to break up those which might function as bridgeheads for another power”. 87 Such notions were made clear by Stalin during the official proclamation of the Tajik ASSR in 1925, where the emphasis on the role Tajikistan could play outside of the Soviet Union was consistently alluded to:

Greetings to Tajikistan, the new soviet working people's republic at the gates of Hindustan. I ardently wish all the working people of Tajikistan success in converting their republic into a model republic of the Eastern countries. The Tajiks have a rich history; their great organizing and political abilities of the past are no secret to anyone. Workers of Tajikistan! Advance the culture of your land, develop its economy, assist the toilers of the city and the village, rally around you the best sons of the fatherland. Show the whole East that it is you, vigorously holding in your hands the banners of liberation, who are the most worthy heirs of your ancestors. 88

In the years following this speech, Tajikistan’s economic development, and political progress were used as a means to legitimise the Soviet system within Tajik domestic politics, and applied internationally to highlight the disadvantages faced by Iranians and other Persian-speaking populations under their “backward” monarchical and bourgeois systems. 89

3.8 Pahlavi Iran and Soviet Tajikistan

Rather than attempting to build inter-societal ties between the newly-formed Tajikistan and Iran, Soviet authorities instead used the real and imagined linguistic and cultural commonalities which existed between these two societies to politically undermine Iran throughout the twentieth century. Such efforts on an unofficial level included pro-Soviet

88 Rakowska-Harmstone, Russia and Nationalism,
89 Ibid., 74.
Persian radio broadcasts beamed into Iran and the distribution of communist literature, and on an official level, the facilitation of a range of cultural, political, and social exchanges between Iran and Tajikistan’s intelligentsia which were developed as a means to spread communist and revolutionary messages and to highlight the superiority of the Soviet system to Iran’s population. The Soviets even went as far to shelter Iranian dissidents and anti-monarchy figures within Tajikistan’s borders. However, while Soviet propaganda efforts were extensive and at times acted as a major irritant to Iranian political authorities, inter-state interactions both on an inter-societal and now at an “inter-state” level between Iran and Soviet Tajikistan were indeed minor and almost non-existent throughout the rule of the Pahlavi dynasty. Although the Tajik intelligentsia took a greater interest in their Iranian roots, and embraced a range of Iranian symbols, histories, and myths, which were interpreted in a nationalistic and decidedly Tajik fashion, Iranian political elites continued to have very little interest in events occurring among their Persian-speaking brethren within the Soviet Union.

A number of factors, both domestic and international, explain the lack of interest among Iran’s political elites towards the Persian-speaking populations of Tajikistan throughout the Pahlavi rule, the most prominent of which lay in Iran’s inability to interact freely and fully with the Tajik SSR in a direct and “normal” state-to-state manner. The strongly centralised Soviet political system did not allow any form of independent foreign policy

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90 For instance, Abul Qasem Lahuti (1887–1957), an Iranian poet and writer, was involved in a number of anti-monarchical activities in Iran during the 1910s and 1920s, the most famous of which was the Tabriz Rebellion of 1922. Lahuti fled to Tajikistan in the 1920s, becoming a close associate of Stalin and a key figure within Tajikistan’s intelligentsia. Under his pseudonym ‘Iransky’, Lahuti was responsible for a number of Comintern and Soviet publications relating to Iran for almost a quarter of a century. See Farhad Atai, “Soviet Cultural Legacy in Tajikistan,” *Iranian Studies* 45, no. 1 (2011): 88; Stephanie Cronin, *The Army and Creation of the Pahlavi State in Iran, 1921-1926* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 1997), 49-50.

for its subject republics. All interactions with states outside of the Soviet Union occurred through, and at the behest of, central authorities in Moscow. This effectively placed Tajikistan out of the reach of Iranian policy planners, who in any event displayed very little interest in the small, and somewhat peripheral, population of Persian-speaking Tajiks in Central Asia. Although this was generally the case, Tajikistan—as the locale of “past Iranian glories”—did occasionally emerge within Iranian public discourse, with evidence that members of the Iranian *majlis* had at various times called for the return of Caucasian and Central Asian territories lost to Tsarist Russia, however no serious claims were ever made in the international arena to return these lands. In any event, concerns and international challenges much larger than grandiose visions of re-forming the borders of Greater Iran focused the minds of Iranian elites throughout the Pahlavi dynasty, and minimised Iran’s interests in Tajikistan and the wider Central Asian region. Furthermore, Iran’s often tense relationship with the Soviet Union throughout the rule of both Reza Shah, and Muhammad Reza Shah placed considerable obstacles in front of Iran’s interests in, or relations with, the peripheral Central Asian regions under Soviet central control.

Under Reza Shah for instance, Iran’s relations with the Soviet Union were characterised by larger and much more pressing issues, such as Iran’s efforts to remove the series of unjust agreements signed between Iran and Tsarist Russia, and to prevent consistent Soviet meddling in Iran’s domestic affairs. The Soviets were key supporters of Iranian communist opponents, and were considered by a number of scholars as instrumental in the creation of the anti-monarchical *Tudeh* party. The material and ideological support

92 See Parker, *Persian Dreams*, 1-5.

93 The *Tudeh* (masses) party was nationalist, left-wing and anti-Western organisation, which was deeply sympathetic to Stalinist-Marxist ideologies. Chaqueri, examined a wide array of primary sources emanating from the early 1940s, relating to conversations and meetings between Iranian communists and Soviet officials. According to Chaqueri these documents “clearly” show that the “Tudeh was a creation of the Soviet state, through the agency of its Red Army, thus demolishing the thesis that this organization was a genuine party established independently by the progressive elements who had been released from Reza
provided by the Soviets for communist movements in Iran was the cause of significant
domestic instability and turmoil, and led to direct challenges to Iran’s ruling monarchy
on a number of occasions.\textsuperscript{94} The Soviet-instigated domestic challenges faced by Reza
Shah carried over to the international arena, where he had to carefully balance the
demands and interests of Soviet authorities. Although Reza Shah made noteworthy gains
in restoring Iranian independence following the humiliation it had suffered at the hands
of European powers during the rule of the Qajars, he was ultimately unsuccessful. In 1941
the Soviet Union and Great Britain overthrew his rule and occupied Iran for five years,
ostensibly as punishment for his pro-German stance and unwillingness to allow the Allies
to use Iranian railway networks to resupply the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{95}

Following Reza Khan’s exile from the country, the occupying forces installed his more
pliable son, Muhammad Reza to the Iranian throne. Throughout his reign, Muhammad
Reza engaged in a tense and at times toxic relationship with Soviet authorities in Moscow.
Whilst often proclaiming an independent and staunchly nationalist stance on international
relations, Muhammad Reza Shah was heavily dependent upon, and deeply beholden to,
the interests and influence of the United States, the Soviet Union’s Cold War adversary.
Throughout his reign, the United States had great influence over Iran’s economic,
political, cultural, and social affairs. This influence, according to Saikal,

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\textsuperscript{94} Wheeler provides a number of examples of Soviet interference in Iran during the early twentieth
century, declaring that: “In Persia, Soviet tactics included an attempt to create a Soviet Republic in the
northern province of Gilan, the establishment of eight Soviet consulates and a number of commercial
organizations, clubs, and propaganda agents, the creation of a Persian Communist Party, and the
exploitation, if not the actual instigation, of mutinies in the Persian army.” See Geoffrey Wheeler, “Soviet

\textsuperscript{95} See Michael Axworthy, \textit{Iran Empire of the Mind}, 232
implied a narrowing of the Iranian regime’s policy options to a pro-Western, mainly pro-American stance in its domestic and foreign policy. Thus the regime, both officially and unofficially, tied Iran’s national development and foreign policy objectives to the interests of the West, which ensured Iran’s “dependence relationship” with the United States. In this relationship, Washington acted as a “Patron Power” preserving the Shah’s regime and influencing the direction and the content of its policies in line with western regional and international interests.96

The entrenchment of Iran within the “Western camp” was solidified by Iran’s entrance into the pro-Western Baghdad Pact, or the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO) in 1955, and the signing of a bilateral military agreement with the United States in 1959. Iran’s ties with the Soviet Union remained icy for almost 20 years, with the beginnings of a thaw in relations only taking place in 1962, when the Iranian government announced that it would not allow the stationing of foreign missiles on its soil, a move which was looked upon favourably by Soviet authorities in Moscow.97

The tentative beginnings of rapprochement between Iran and the Soviet Union brought to an end a number of the Soviet radio and press propaganda efforts, many of which had emanated across Iran’s Central Asian and Caucasian borders. Furthermore the Soviet Union declared its support for the Shah’s land reforms, and sought to rein in the anti-government actions of the Tudeh party.98 Although Iran remained closely allied to the United States, Iran did accept a number of low interest loans, and technical, economic, and military assistance from the Soviet Union, and in 1967 signed a series of long-term agreements with the Soviet Union to export Iranian oil and natural gas to bordering Soviet Republics Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan.99 The warming of ties between Iran and the Soviet Union had finally opened up small but important opportunities for Iran to interact


97 Parker, Persian Dreams, 3; Saikal, “Iranian Foreign Policy,” 436.


99 Parker, Persian Dreams, 4.
with Soviet Central Asia, a region that had ostensibly been sealed off from Iran for centuries. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Iranian authorities discussed a number of projects, which would economically link Soviet Central Asia to Iran, and Iranian officials often visited Tajikistan and the other Soviet Central Asian Republics on official and unofficial business.100

Although there was an increase in links between Iran and Tajikistan throughout the 1960s and 1970s, such links were largely restricted to the upper rungs of both societies’ intelligentsia, and usually revolved around discussions and exchanges in the fields of art and culture. Furthermore, while these cultural ties were important, the sense among Tajiks that they had a shared history and culture with Iran had been considerably weakened throughout the Sovietisation process. From the moment Tajikistan was conferred republican status within the USSR, Tajik academicians sought to reinterpret and create their own national culture, which although built upon symbols, myths, and histories familiar to Iranians, were however interpreted by Tajikistan’s elite in a nationalistic and decidedly Tajik fashion. From the changing of the alphabet from Arabic to Cyrillic by Soviet authorities, to Bobojon Ghafurov’s101 staunchly nationalistic attempts to claim much of Iran’s history solely for Tajikistan, Tajiks began to strongly and at times fervently view themselves not in terms of a greater Iranian civilisation, but rather in much narrower national terms, which had a major impact on weakening cultural links between Tajikistan and Iran throughout Soviet rule, but also had the effect of strengthening a Tajik national “self”.102

100 The most notable of these visits to Tajikistan was by the Shah’s sister, Ashraf Pahlavi in 1964. Amir Taheri, Crescent in a Red Sky, The Future of Islam in the Soviet Union, (London: Hutchinson, 1989), 176.

101 Bobojon Ghafurov was the First Secretary of the Tajik Communist Party between 1946 and 1956, and is widely considered as one of the most important figures in the development of Tajik historiography.

102 Ghafurov strongly argued that the Samanid state was the ‘endpoint’ for the development of a Tajik national and ethnic identity. By making such a claim Ghafurov, according to Suyarkulova, sought to differentiate “Tajiks from Persians, arguing that although the Tajiks are of Persian stock, they have had an independent path in history and that it would be unfair to attribute all Persian heritage to contemporary Iran alone”. For instance, historical figures such as Omar Khayyam and Hafez were no longer Iranian but rather
Apart from these cultural links and developments, which occurred throughout the Pahlavi dynasty, Iranian authorities throughout the 1960s and 1970s discussed a number of projects which would economically link Soviet Central Asia to Iran. According to Taheri, “one proposal envisaged the construction of a railway line connecting Central Asia to the Gulf of Oman via Afghanistan and the Iranian province of Sistan and Baluchistan”.103 These plans, if they had come to fruition, would have eventually led to greater interaction at least on an economic level between Iran, Tajikistan, and the other Soviet Central Asian republics, however this plan was never enacted. Tajikistan remained isolated from the Iranian government, which had throughout the twentieth century been hamstrung by domestic concerns, had consistently implemented a deeply Western compromised foreign policy agenda, and had almost obsessively attempted to establish Iran as a “great power” in the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean regions.104 In these circumstances Tajikistan and the wider Soviet Central Asian region came a distant second in Iran’s regional foreign policy interests and agendas. Great changes however were only around the corner, and with the eventual fall of Muhammad Reza Shah, and the promulgation of the Islamic Republic in 1979, Iranian policy planners took a newfound interest in the Muslim populations of Central Asia, which would usher in the beginning of greater Iranian interest and influence in Tajikistan.

were Tajiks. See Mohira Suyarkulova, “Statehood as Dialogue: Conflicting Historical Narratives of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan,” in The Transformation of Tajikistan: The Sources of Statehood, ed. John Heathershaw and Edmund Herzig (London: Routledge, 2013), 166-67. Ghafurov’s works were and remain extremely popular in Tajikistan. According to Nourzhanov and Bleuer, “Ghafurov’s monumental work The Tajiks: Archaic, Ancient and Mediaeval History, which laid claim to most of the classical Persian canon, was a milestone in the process of reinventing Tajik history. It quickly became the bible of every Tajik intellectual: in 1989, 62 per cent of tertiary students of the titular nationality had this book in their possession.” See Nourzhanov and Bleuer, Tajikistan: A Political and Social History, 173.

103 Ibid.

104 Ervand Abrahamian, A History of Modern Iran, 125; Suzanne Maloney, “Identity and Change in Iran’s Foreign Policy,” 96.
3.9 The Islamic Republic and Soviet Tajikistan

The rise to power of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and the promulgation of the Islamic Republic in 1979, drastically shifted Iran’s broad foreign policy stance within the international political system. Almost overnight Iran went from being a close Western ally to an international “pariah” that sought to institute a new global Islamic order which would not only Islamise Iranian state and society, but also challenge the global political status quo, which was presumed to have erroneously placed the temporal above the spiritual, and had “oppressed” the world’s Muslim peoples for hundreds of years.105 Iran’s unique spiritual vision ushered in the beginnings of Iranian attempts to “export the revolution”, a process which destabilised its “un-Islamic” regional neighbours, and was considered deeply unnerving and abhorrent to both the United States and the Soviet Union.106 The establishment of the Islamic Republic was particularly challenging to the Soviet Union, who initially praised the “crash of absolutism” and sought to establish good ties with Tehran’s new revolutionary government.107 However, the Islamic Republic’s hostility towards atheistic communism, and to the Soviet’s rule of Muslim populations within Central Asia and the Caucasus, dashed Soviet hopes that it could establish cooperative ties with Iran’s new government in the years immediately following the revolution. Moreover, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, its support for Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War, and its implication in the support of separatist and leftist groups in Iran acted as vital sustenance to the constant stream of Iranian vitriol which spewed forth at the Soviet Union, a state considered to be “no less satanic” than its Cold War rival, the United States. In the early years of the revolution the new Islamic regime became a thorn in the side of the Soviet Union’s regional agendas, and quickly presented itself as a

challenge to Soviet ideological power in Muslim Central Asia. Iran’s post-revolutionary political elites viewed the Central Asian region as fertile ground in their efforts to export the Islamic Revolution beyond Iran’s borders, and although Soviet authorities had consistently declared that Islam was dead in the Soviet Union and no longer constituted a living ideological force, a growing sense of Islamic self-awareness and practice had increasingly taken shape among Soviet Muslims throughout the 1970s. In response to these domestic developments within the Soviet Union, Iran’s revolutionary government quickly set out to harness and use the growing Islamic sentiments of Central Asian Muslims to directly challenge “Soviet atheism”, and spread its own unique brand of political Islam across its northern and eastern borders.

One of Iran’s first post-revolutionary foreign policy endeavours was the establishment of a special committee which would attempt to “revive the message of Islam in the USSR”, and from the spring of 1979, the Iranians began to beam Islamic programs and propaganda within the Soviet Union’s borders. According to Taheri, “each week Iranian transmitters broadcast a total of 200 hours of programmes in Azeri, Uzbek, Turkmen, and Tajik (Dari) to the USSR”. The majority of these programs dealt with long-forgotten struggles of Muslims against the Russian expansion into the Caucasus and Central Asia in the nineteenth century, and sought to “assist” Soviet Muslims in the rediscovery of their Islamic roots. While it is difficult to ascertain the impact these programs had on local

108 Voll, “Central Asia,” 64.


110 In August 1980, the Iranian Foreign Ministry made a number of demands to Soviet officials, which included the closing of the Soviet consulates in Rasht and Esfahan, the reduction of Soviet embassy staff in Tehran, and the transfer of Iran’s consulate in Leningrad to Dushanbe. "Iranian Statement on Talks with USSR: Closure of Consulates " The British Broadcasting Corporation, 1980; Taheri, Crescent in a Red Sky, 186.

111 Ibid.
Muslim populations in the Caucasus and Central Asia, Soviet authorities were concerned enough to publicly condemn the growing embrace of Islamic “backwardness” in Muslim majority regions, and displayed considerable hostility towards Iran’s outward attempt to stoke “Islamic agitation” within the Soviet Union’s borders.

Throughout the 1980s, Tajikistan became a prime target for Iran’s propaganda and proselytising efforts. Despite the fact that the majority of Tajiks followed the Sunni sect of Islam, and Tajik society had been thoroughly secularised after more than 50 years of Soviet rule, Iranian political elites believed that the shared language and culture of Tajik and Iranian society would assist in increasing Iran’s influence in this largely forgotten region. Following the revolution, Iranian governing figures made consistent attempts to visit Tajikistan, efforts that were knocked back by the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Iran’s intense focus upon Tajikistan as a site of spiritual infiltration was confirmed in 1982, when Iran sought Soviet permission to open a consulate in Dushanbe, a request that in the words of Parker “went all the way to the top before being nixed by the party Politburo”, who were well aware that Iran’s motivations in establishing a consulate were based on ideological and religious reasons, not diplomatic ones. Iran’s efforts in proselytising and spreading its revolutionary message in Tajikistan and Central Asia—while notable—encountered significant difficulties due in no small part to the Iran’s economic weakness stemming from its international isolation, and its continuing war with Iraq. Furthermore, throughout the early 1980s the KGB and other Soviet security apparatuses had generally minimised the impact of Iran’s influence in Tajikistan. In an interview conducted by Parker with former member of the Politburo

113 Taheri, Crescent in a Red Sky, 187.
114 Parker, Persian Dreams, 15.
115 "Iranian Statement on Talks with USSR: Closure of Consulates."
and Secretariat of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Aleksandr Yakovlev, it was claimed that Soviet intelligence had kept a close eye upon Iran’s efforts to influence Islamist groups in the region, and although, “the [Soviet security] services discovered some instances of such activities but not what appeared to be a serious, coordinated effort directed from Iran”, and individual cases of Islamist groups operating in Tajikistan were largely local initiatives, extremely disorganised, and very few in number.¹¹⁷

The ability of the Soviet central authorities to circumscribe Iran’s influence in Tajikistan was however considerably compromised following the imposition of domestic reforms, beginning in 1985, by Mikhail Gorbachev, the General Secretary of the Politburo. Under perestroika, Soviet central control over the union republics began to weaken, and provided Iran with important opportunities to influence the rapidly changing domestic circumstances which were taking place within Tajikistan and the wider Soviet Union. The political, economic, and social reforms instigated by Gorbachev throughout the late 1980s opened deep fissures in Soviet society, and saw the flourishing of a range of nationalist and Islamist opposition groups and movements in Tajikistan. Groups such as the Islamic Renaissance Party, Rastokhez (Revival), and a range of small rag-tag Islamist organisations increasingly challenged the ruling status quo, and sought greater national and religious rights in the gathering maelstrom that began to form in the years leading up to the collapse of the Soviet Union.¹¹⁸ Iran’s direct efforts in influencing these groups is not well documented, however it is clear that prominent figures within these organisations were inspired by some of Iran’s more incendiary revolutionary messages, and sought to cultivate greater political and ideological links with their Iranian brethren.¹¹⁹ Furthermore, a number of former Soviet political figures were aware of large levels of Iranian financial assistance entering Tajikistan beginning in 1988 and 1989, and while the exact destination of this funding is unknown, it would be naïve to believe that none of this funding went to

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 45.
¹¹⁸ Hiro, Inside Central Asia, 318.
¹¹⁹ Monica Whitlock, Beyond the Oxus: The Central Asians (London: John Murray, 2002), 115-16.
Soviet opposition movements.\(^{120}\) While this may be the case, it seems that Iran’s influence in Tajikistan moving into the final years of the Soviet Union was largely restrained due in no small part to a growing awareness among the Iranian political elite that better links were needed with Moscow to break Iran free from its growing international isolation, and the diabolical economic situation it had found itself in after almost a decade of war.\(^{121}\)

Throughout the mid to late-1980s, pragmatists in the Iranian government sought to pursue closer ties with the Soviet Union, with Iranian-Soviet rapprochement solidified in 1989 following the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, and the ending of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988, significantly easing tension between the two states. Just prior to his death, Ayatollah Khomeini engaged in written correspondence with Gorbachev, and advised his successors to improve relations with the Soviet Union. Only three weeks following the death of Khomeini, Iran’s speaker of parliament and future president, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, made a historic visit to Moscow where a number of military, economic, and diplomatic protocols were signed. This visit led to the signing of a joint communique which called for “more contacts and exchanges between Iranian and Soviet religious leaders”.\(^{122}\) The signing of this communique was surprising, particularly in light of the Soviet’s past wariness of Iranian proselytising efforts in Central Asia.\(^{123}\) A number of former Soviet diplomats have asserted that Gorbachev, in providing Iran the all clear to increase its religious influence within the borders of the Soviet Union, was driven more by the distractions and other dilemmas facing the Soviet’s at that time, and a confident

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\(^{120}\) Parker, *Persian Dreams*, 45.

\(^{121}\) Edmund Herzig, “Regionalism, Iran and Central Asia,”, 504.


\(^{123}\) Gorbachev only two years before this meeting with Rafsanjani warned the former President of Syria, Hafez al-Assad not to get ‘too close’ to the Iranians, declaring: “In Tehran they follow clerical reactionary ideas which are not good for the Arabs. Iranian Leaders are trying to spread those ideas, even in Central Asia…” See Stroilov, *Behind the Desert Storm*, 61.
belief within the Soviet leadership that Iran’s influence could be “controlled” and used to Soviet advantage.

The encouraging openings given to Iran by the Soviets in Tajikistan were placed in jeopardy by the rapid unravelling of the Soviet Union in 1990-1991. While Iranian elites were excited by the prospects of filling the power vacuum left by the Soviets in Tajikistan, the very real prospect of instability and violence threatened Iran’s interests moving forward. Overwhelmingly, the more realistically-inclined Iranian elites did not welcome the weakening of the Soviet Union, and saw little to gain from the collapse of a once stable and newly-acquired political ally.\textsuperscript{124} In the final months of the Soviet Union, rather than attempting to rapidly expand its influence in Tajikistan, Iranian elites moved cautiously, not wishing to upset the new and friendly relationship they had developed with Moscow. In many respects Iranian political elites were over-cautious, and on a number of occasions were out-flanked by other states seeking to benefit from the chaotic events ensuing within Tajikistan and the wider post-Soviet political landscape. With the declaration of Tajik independence on September 9, 1991, Iranian political elites had to rapidly readjust their foreign policy stance going forward. A new dawn had finally arrived in Central Asia, and although there was excitement in the Tehran press and within the official media, who longingly looked east to the prospects of another “Greater Iran” being formed in the near future, Iran quickly found that the prospects of increasing its influence and developing friendly bonds with Tajikistan would be more difficult than ever imagined.

\textbf{3.10 Conclusion}

This chapter has outlined the historical context of Iranian-Tajik relations. It has argued that despite having a shared language and set of cultural mores, ties between the peoples of these two states has historically been characterised by a lack of interaction and engagement. The tyranny of distance, geography, the ebb and flow of empires, sectarian

\textsuperscript{124} Mohiaddin Mesbahi, “Iran and Central Asia,” 111.
differences, and the development of unique and exclusivist modern national and political cultures have all played a major role in separating Iranians from their “close cultural cousins”, the Tajiks. Nevertheless, the idea of a shared past is much more important than the actual reality, and rather than focus on the issues that separate their nations, Tajik and Iranian leaders have largely sought to build upon the myth of a common history and culture to frame and justify their modern political relations. However, the idea that Iranians and Tajiks are inseparable due to a so-called 1000-year shared history has often led to the glossing over of the real and very important points of political conflict and friction that has often taken place between the two countries in the post-Soviet era.
Chapter Four: Iran and Tajikistan 1991-1997 – Independence and War

As Iranian officials put the finishing touches on the opening of what would become Tajikistan’s first foreign embassy in the capital of Dushanbe in January 1992, there was great hope and excitement about the future trajectory of relations between these two states. Although Tajikistan lacked the economic and political weight of other newly-independent Soviet Central Asian republics such as Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, Iranian foreign officials enthusiastically proposed a range of cultural, economic, and political programs that would reconnect Tajikistan with Iran after the 70-year so-called “disruption” of relations caused by Soviet rule. As aptly summed up by Djalili and Grare, although Tajikistan was geographically and politically “remote”, Iran was “very sensitive to everything to do with Tajikistan, because of the cultural, historic and above all linguistic affinities” that were perceived to have existed between these two societies. Within days of independence, the Tajik government was bombarded with a range of Iranian proposals including the establishment of Persian language schools and facilities, regular air links between Iranian cities and Dushanbe, the building of highways which would eventually connect Iran’s eastern provinces to Tajikistan, and the establishment of commercial deals with Iranian private enterprises seeking new markets and new opportunities. These efforts to “re-establish” ties between Iran and Tajikistan were, according to Iran’s Deputy Foreign Minister of the time Abbas Maleki, a “natural continuation” of the common history that existed between the two states.

However, such flowery public pronouncements overlooked Iran’s inability to fulfil most of these proposals, and more importantly glossed over the serious instability that wracked

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3 “Iran's Maleki on Expansion of Relations.”
Tajikistan in the months leading up to and following independence. Worsening economic conditions in Tajikistan, increased freedom of expression brought about by Soviet central reforms, and poor governance had contributed to a political environment whereby multiple groups and actors jockeyed for power over the Tajik state. This process eventually led to a spiral of protests, counter-protests, and political violence that eventually shattered the very fabric of Tajik society.

This chapter seeks to analyse Iran’s early interactions with independent Tajikistan that clearly set out Iran’s actual policies and actions during the presidency of Ali Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997). This chapter will focus its attention upon Iran’s foreign policy behaviour during the Tajik Civil War, and its interactions not only with the Tajik government and opposition, but also with the other prominent regional party to this conflict, Russia. In doing so, this chapter will provide context to the conflict that tore Tajikistan apart, necessarily outlining the key factors and actors involved in the Tajik Civil War, and examine Iran’s actions throughout this conflict and the drawn-out peace process which sought to bring an end to the terrible violence that gripped Tajikistan between 1992 and 1997.4

4.1 Background to Conflict in Tajikistan

The series of reforms instigated by Russian President Mikhail Gorbachev in the mid-1980s had an interminably negative impact upon Tajikistan, contributing to economic decline, the weakening of political authority, and most disturbingly lifting the lid on seething local rivalries, which up to that point had remained subsumed under the edifice of Soviet political control. While Gorbachev’s reform drive did open the space for the creation of a range of opposition groups and reform movements who sought to challenge a communist regime that was unwilling to loosen its grip on political power; these opposition groups—the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), La’lī Badakhson (Ruby of

4 A version of this chapter has been published as Brenton Clark, "Iran and the Civil War in Tajikistan," *Journal of Central Asian and Caucasian Studies* 9, no. 18 (2014): 81-127.
Badakhshan), *Rastokhez* (Revival) and the Democratic Party of Tajikistan (DPT)—rather than being broad-based in their popular support were often little more than vehicles for smaller sub-national local and regional groupings vying for political control over the levers of the Tajik state. These opposition groups pursued varied political interests and ideologies. This ranged from the IRP’s emphasis upon the revival of Islam in Tajik public and personal life, the pro-Western democratic inclination of the DPT, *Rastokhez*’s national revivalist platform,\(^5\) to *La’li Badakshon’s* attempts to forward the political interests of the Pamiri ethnic minority. However running on these political platforms meant all of the groups gained their support from narrow segments of Tajik society. For instance, the DPT and *Rastokhez* were supported by the urban-based intelligentsia that had been marginalised from the organs of Communist political power, whereas the IRP gained most of its support from the regional areas of Gharm and the Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO). The reason for this support for the IRP in these two regions was due in no small part to the IRP’s anti-communist platform, which won favour from the peoples of two regions that had largely been left out of the Communist power structure, among other factors.\(^6\)

From its very foundation Tajikistan was defined by local and regional loyalties, a direct and unfortunate product of Soviet political and administrative machinations.\(^7\) Throughout most of the period of Soviet rule in Tajikistan, the northern region of Khojand had almost single-handedly controlled the top political positions of the Communist Party of

\(^5\) A full outline of *Rastokhez’s* history and political ideology is provided in Nourzhanov and Bleuer, *Tajikistan: A Political and Social History*, 195-203.


This system of Khojandi dominance was solidified in the 1970s, whereby individuals from the southern Kulob district were brought into the leadership fold, thus extending the base of support for the CPT beyond the northern regions. The Khojandis had in many respects created a system that resembled an “Indian caste pyramid”, which could be maintained as long as the Soviet system of governance remained stable. With the breakdown of Soviet rule, those outside of the Khujandi-Kulobi political alliance had found in the organisational frameworks of the burgeoning opposition political groups a warm incubator for their decades-long political, social, and economic grievances.

These grievances, which had increasingly reared their head throughout the late 1980s, had by 1991 become a serious threat to the rule of the CPT in Tajikistan. According to Nourzhanov and Bleuer:

[L]ocal elites in Leninobod, Hisor, Kulob, and also to a certain extent in Qurghonteppa, worked to maintain their positions in the face of the perestroika

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8 Since the 1940s, people from Khojand had controlled Communist party power in Tajikistan. Khojandis along with their clients, the people of Kulob, came to dominate Tajik politics and eventually became ‘one side’ in the Tajik Civil War. See ibid. Under the rule of the Khojandis, regionalism became the basis of politics in Tajikistan, which was reinforced by the fact that most investment and infrastructure funds were devoted to the northern region, whereas the other regions of the republic, the GBAO, and the southern districts suffered from poor infrastructure and transportation links, which only reinforced local and regional-based solidarities. Furthermore, the process of regionalisation was enhanced by the Soviet drive towards collectivisation. A key example of the impact of collectivisation in enhancing regional solidarities and conflict was the resettling of large numbers of Gharmis and Kulobis in the area around Kurgan-Tyube in the 1950s. By moving onto collective farms, regional identities were solidified in contradistinction to other regional groups inhabiting the same farm or region, and went above and beyond traditional forms of identification and segmentation such as the clan, village, and caste. See Dov Lynch, "The Tajik Civil War and Peace Process," Civil Wars 4, no. 4 (2001): 49-72; Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh, "Causes and Consequences of the Tajik Civil War," Central Asia Monitor 1(1993): 10-14; Roy, The New Central Asia – Geopolitics and the Birth of Nations, 139.

9 Roy, The Civil War, 17.

bureaucratic reforms. On the other side, regional elites from the Pamirs and Gharms (including Gharmis in Dushanbe and Qurghonteppa Province) increasingly began to use the political parties and Gorbachev’s reforms as a vehicle to make political gains...Soon region of origin became associated with support for, or opposition to, the perestroika reforms—both in the bureaucracy in Dushanbe and in the rural areas where local elites (for example, collective farm bosses and provincial/district leaders) had much to gain or lose from the reforms. 11

Similar to dynamics taking place in other parts of the USSR, in Tajikistan under the leadership of the Tajik Communist First Party Secretary, Qahhor Mahkamov, there was a strong unwillingness to instigate Gorbachev’s reform agenda.12 Frustration among the opposition groups towards the political status quo turned to rage following Mahkamov’s decision to side with Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) hardliners during the failed putsch attempt in Moscow in August 1991. Mass demonstrations, largely made up of IRP and DPT supporters, were held in Dushanbe demanding Mahkamov’s resignation and the banning of the CPT.13 With the failure of the coup attempt in Moscow, and mounting protests in Dushanbe, Mahkamov’s position became untenable and he resigned on August 23, 1991. The resignation of the republic’s president and the leader of the CPT did not placate the opposition, who continued to call for the banning of the CPT, while also demanding the legalisation of the IRP, who had remained a banned political group in Tajikistan. On August 31, 1991, the Supreme Soviet of Tajikistan elected Qadriddin Aslonov to serve as the interim President of Tajikistan.14 The election by the Supreme Soviet of Aslonov did not however quell dissent on the streets of Dushanbe, and he, too, was forced from office.15 The Supreme Soviet then appointed Rahmon Nabiev, a former


12 Shirin Akiner, Tajikistan: Disintegration or Reconciliation?, 35.


14 Nourzhanov and Bleuer, Tajikistan: A Political and Social History, 279.

15 By the end of September, 1991, an estimated 10,000 opposition supporters had camped out in front of the Supreme Soviet. Aslonov, in the face of mounting pressure caved into the opposition’s demands,
First Secretary of the Tajik SSR, to the position of interim president, and chairman of the Supreme Soviet.\textsuperscript{16}

Rather than bringing about calm, the appointment of Nabiev triggered only further protests and instability in Dushanbe, and thousands of protesters remained on the streets of Dushanbe throughout October, 1991.\textsuperscript{17} In an attempt to quieten dissent and reduce political tensions, Nabiev stood down as the chairman of the Supreme Soviet, lifted the state of emergency, postponed the planned presidential election from October 27 to November 25, suspended the CPT for two months to allow an investigation into its involvement in the August Putsch attempt, and overturned the ban on the formation of religious parties, thus allowing the IRP\textsuperscript{18} to involve itself in the upcoming presidential election. These measures taken by Nabiev raised considerable excitement among the opposition, who rallied behind the presidential candidacy of Pamiri cinematographer Davlat Khudonazarov.\textsuperscript{19} Nabiev, however, had “managed to rally the majority of the northern ‘clans’ around him”, with substantial support for his election coming from his

legalising the IRP, banning the CPT, and seizing all of the party’s assets. Aslonov had, however, made these decrees without consulting the Supreme Soviet, which had an overwhelming communist majority. The following day the Supreme Soviet held an emergency session whereby Aslonov was promptly forced from office, the ban on the CPT lifted, and the ban on the IRP reinstated. See ibid., 279-81.

\textsuperscript{16} Rahmon Nabiev had formerly been the First Secretary of the Tajik SSR between 1982 and 1985. For a profile of Nabiev see Kamoludin Abdullaev and Shahram Akbarzadeh, *Historical Dictionary of Tajikistan* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 249.

\textsuperscript{17} While a state of emergency and martial law had been passed by the Supreme Soviet, it was not enforced.

\textsuperscript{18} The IRP had its genesis in the Congress of Muslims in the USSR held in June 1990, which created a pan-Soviet Islamic Renaissance Party. Although the Soviet IRP had been allowed to operate in the Soviet Union, the IRP’s Tajik offshoot was banned in Tajikistan. See Saodat Olimova and Muzaffar Olimov, “The Islamic Renaissance Party,” in *Accord, Politics of Compromise: The Tajikistan Peace Process*, ed. Kamoludin Abdullaev and Catherine Barnes (London: Conciliation Resources, 2001), 26.

\textsuperscript{19} Khudonazarov was supported in his candidature by the IRP, DPT, *La’li Badakhshon*, and *Rastokhez*. Khudonazarov had strong familial and personal ties with the CPT, but was often critical of its policies. Although belonging to no party, Khudonazarov was an attractive candidate due to his strong links to Kremlin reformers, and would bring in the votes of the urban elite and the Pamiris. For full discussion and profile see Nourzhanov and Bleuer, *Tajikistan: A Political and Social History*, 287-88.
Khojandi brethren and Kulobi allies. This regional support, along with the perception that Nabiev represented a “steady and familiar hand” due to his former position as First Secretary of the Tajik SSR, propelled Nabiev to victory over Khudonazarov.

With the election of Nabiev it was hoped that finally some semblance of stability had arrived in Tajikistan. Nabiev had, however, inherited a system of government that stood on shaky foundations, and a society that was already deeply fractured. Under Nabiev’s leadership, Tajikistan would in only a few short months quickly descend into a level of violence and anarchy that would create deep shock throughout the wider region.

4.2 Iran and the Election of Nabiev

The convoluted process leading up to the formation of Tajikistan’s first democratically-elected government under the leadership of “former” communist Nabiev placed Iran in a difficult position. As the so-called representative of “Muslims worldwide”, prominent members of Iran’s government no doubt would have felt an obligation to support Tajikistan’s opposition groups, in particular the IRP, in their attempts to take control of the Tajik state against the “repressive” and “atheistic” communist regime represented by the Khojandi-Kulobi regional bloc. Throughout 1991, the IRP was front and centre of the political developments taking place on the ground in Tajikistan, and were considered to be the largest political grouping after the DPT in Tajikistan with more than 30,000 members. The IRP campaigned for “national independence, free elections and a multi-party democracy, a “decent life” for all citizens regardless of religion or ethnicity, and education of the people in Islamic principles”. Most important, however, was the IRP’s

20 The poll returns for the election placed Nabiev’s victory at 56.92 percent of the vote over Khudonazarov’s 30.07 percent. Although the opposition claimed that the election was fraudulent, they did not challenge the result, knowing that the irregularities would not have been to the extent to have changed the result See ibid., 284-90.


22 Nourzhanov and Bleuer, Tajikistan: A Political and Social History, 264.
emphasis on establishing an Islamic state within Tajikistan. According to Nourzhanov and Bleuer, the formation of an “Islamic Republic of Tajikistan” in the calculations of the IRP would be achieved “through an election victory and then a referendum; however, this desired end-state was modified when the IRP realised that this goal was not supported by many people in Tajikistan”. This lack of support was no surprise considering that Tajik Muslims had largely been separated from the rest of the Islamic world for decades, and as summed up by Mesbahi, Tajiks had experienced intense anti-Islamic state propaganda and socialization, which [had] resulted in the general ignorance of the public about Islam, either in its orthodox forms, or the politicized “Iranian” version.

With this factor in mind, the IRP’s goal of establishing an Islamic state, as was consistently stated by its leadership, would come about through gradual rather than revolutionary means, and the IRP’s political actions throughout 1991 were overwhelmingly cautious, and fell largely within the limited political bounds offered by their communist opponents.

This caution and the IRP’s consistent declarations that it would heed the democratic process unfolding within Tajikistan did not quell suspicions that the organisation was, among other things, a Trojan horse for Iranian ideological machinations. These suspicions came despite the IRP’s leader Muhammad Sharif Himmatzoda making clear that fears of Tajikistan following in the footsteps of Iran were “ridiculous”, adding that: “Although Iranians and [Tajiks] come from the same Persian roots and have many cultural similarities, Iranians are mainly Shi’ite Muslims, while [Tajiks] are Sunni Muslims.”


26 See Justin Burke, "Activists Reassert Muslim Culture in Tadzhikistan" Christian Science Monitor December 5, 1991. Even a low-level Imam expressed the incompatibility and differences between Islam in Iran and Tajikistan. In an interview with a somewhat incredulous journalist, who had asked if Iran was good
Furthermore, Himmatzoda went on to note that it would take at least “70 years” for an Islamic state to develop in Tajikistan, and such a process would have to take place gradually, adding further:

There will be a time when Islam will be the state religion and there is no harm in it … Islam will not be imposed on others. Jews and Christians will be allowed to worship freely. Now many in the West and here also are afraid of fundamentalism because fundamentalists are identified as extremists and terrorists. But it really isn't so. Fundamentalism is the return to the roots of Islam.27

Nevertheless, Western and Soviet news media outlets had a field day, likening the IRP’s agendas with the revolutionary events that occurred in Iran only a decade earlier, drawing parallels which were not only flimsy but at times utterly absurd. Some examples of the misinformed stories that were proliferating in the worldwide news media included that Tajikistan would become the next state to follow in Iran’s footsteps on the road to an “Islamic Revolution”, and that a belt of Islamic fundamentalist states was about to arise throughout the Asian continent, filling the void left by communism. According to a number of these articles, Tajiks had a stark choice to make, between either the red flags of communism or the green flag of Islamic fundamentalism.28 Iran was indeed sympathetic to the views of the IRP, however Iran actively pursued good relations with all of the opposition political groups in Tajikistan, whether they were communists, Tajik nationalists, or Islamists.29 In the months leading up to independence and the election of Nabiev, it was unclear who would end up prevailing in the numerous political conflicts
that were taking place in Tajikistan, and Iran was pragmatic and prudent enough not to “go all the way” with any one Tajik political grouping. While Iran did have an indirect influence on the IRP, through its own Revolution, and a number of influential figures within the IRP had adopted Khomeini-like anti-Western and Perso-Islamic nationalist discourse in their statements and rhetoric, Iran and its Islamic Revolution did not provide the IRP with its ideological framework, nor did it serve as the main source for its support. Instead, Iran and its revolution acted as inspiration, and had a “demonstration effect” upon the IRP in their attempt to challenge the Tajik political status quo. Rather than Shi’ite Iran’s somewhat religiously unorthodox revolutionary influence, it was the Sunni ideological influences emanating over the southern border from war-torn Afghanistan, and from the wider Sunni Islamic world, that were the main ideological wellspring for the IRP. This was confirmed by a former Iranian diplomatic official, who estimated that at independence, the IRP would have been lucky to have received support from 10 to 15 percent of the Tajik population, and it would have been “irrational” for Iran to sacrifice its emerging political and economic interests for a group that had such a minor backing. The official went on to declare that the majority of Tajikistan’s population, and indeed prominent members of the opposition political parties at the time, held strong sympathies towards Iran, therefore it was only correct for Iran to cultivate relationships and contacts with all political groups no matter their ideological viewpoint.\footnote{For further discussion of Iran and its indirect ideological influences on the IRP see Nourzhanov and Bleuer, \textit{Tajikistan: A Political and Social History}, 231-75; Kirill Nourzhanov, "Nation-Building and Political Islam in Post-Soviet Tajikistan" in \textit{Nationalism and Identity Construction in Central Asia: Dimensions, Dynamics, and Directions}, ed. Mariya Y. Omelicheva (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014), 71-91.}

\footnote{Former Iranian Diplomat. Personal communication with author, Tehran, May 8, 2013. These comments are confirmed by the fact that Iran made a particular effort to establish friendly links with the communist authorities in Tajikistan in the years leading up to independence. For instance, in 1990 Iran sponsored the visits of Tajik communist delegates to Iran to mark the first anniversary of the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, and signed a range of political, economic, and cultural agreements with the leaders of Soviet Tajikistan—while glossing over talk of religion or Iran’s revolutionary heritage. See Atkin, "Iran, Russia and Tajikistan's Civil War,” 268.}

Despite sympathies for the defeated opposition, Iranian officials did not waste any time in ensuring the development of cordial relations with the unreconstructed communist leader of Tajikistan. On only the first day of his presidency Nabiev received Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati and a multi-ministerial delegation of Iranian officials who were midway through a six-country, 10-day visit to the Soviet Union. Iran’s official news service, Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran, enthusiastically described Velayati’s visit to Dushanbe as a successful one that had culminated in the signing of a number of cooperation agreements in the areas of politics, education, trade, science, transport, and culture. Velayati also visited “sites of cultural significance”, such as the statues of Ferdowsi and Avicenna, and for good propagandist measure a local mosque where “Islamic slogans” were shouted and no doubt the good feelings towards Iran’s revolution could be heard. However while Tajikistan had claimed its independence in September of 1991, and Velayati waxed lyrical about the future prospects of Tajik-Iranian relations, Iran still had not recognised the country’s sovereignty. During his visit to Tajikistan, Velayati was pressed by journalists about when Iran would officially recognise the independence of Tajikistan and the other Soviet successor republics in Central Asia. In response, Velayati advised:

Our [Iran’s] position is clear. We went to these republics through the Moscow gate. The Islamic Republic does not intend to take advantage of the existing sensitive circumstances in the Soviet Union. We, as a neighbor of the Soviet Union, wish to see that their situations return to normal as soon as possible. We respect whatever the people of that country as a whole desire, and the republics [of Central Asia] in particular. But we have no intention of provoking or speeding up anything….We do not intend to dictate anything. We do not intend to contribute toward the further deterioration of the situation.


Velayati continued on to note that while Iran wished to recognise the independence of the Soviet successor republics, Iran “was waiting for the legal stages of independence to take place”; in other words, when such independence was accepted and approved by Moscow. Interestingly, in the eyes of Iran’s leadership, if Tajikistan and the other successor republics decided to stay in union with Russia, or separate and form their own republics, it was of indeed no consequence to Tehran. This was made clear by Rafsanjani when he stated:

We are not upset about the collapse of Marxism at all. As to the future of the Soviet Union, what is important is the will of the people…If they decide for all the republics to live together; we will be content and be a good neighbor for them…. If the people want to be independent and live in separate republics, again we are ready to cooperate with all of them. It makes not much difference for us.  

In somewhat simplistic terms, Iran did not want to “jump the gun” and recognise the independence of states such as Tajikistan without ensuring that Russia itself acquiesced to such demands for independence.

Iran’s caution was due to the fact that Rafsanjani viewed maintaining friendly relations with Russia as the ultimate priority when dealing with Tajikistan and Central Asia, a view that was confirmed by a former Iranian Foreign Ministry official who noted that Tajikistan and the wider Central Asian region was “Russia’s backyard…Iran moved in a way as not to disturb Russia”, adding that there was a genuine fear, particularly within the Iranian Foreign Ministry, towards actions that could “spoil” what had to that point been a massive improvement in relations between the two states since Rafsanjani’s state visit to Moscow in 1989. Further adding to this was a former senior minister of the

36 Smolansky, "Turkish and Iranian Policies in Central Asia," 285-86.
37 Former Iranian foreign ministry official, Recorded interview with author, Tehran, April 28, 2013.
Iranian Foreign Ministry who stated that: “Worrying about Russia’s regional interests did hurt Iran particularly in the case of not supporting our Muslim brothers in conflicts such as in Chechnya and Tajikistan…it hurts but if you look at the long-term benefits to Iran and strategic interests I think it was correct that Iran was looking to Moscow rather than focusing on issues such as Chechnya, Dagestan, Nagorno-Karabakh and Tajikistan.”

This so-called “Russian factor” would be a central element in shaping Iran’s foreign agendas and interests in Tajikistan throughout Rafsanjani’s presidency.

The underlying cause of this pre-occupation with ensuring friendly, if not correct diplomatic relations with Russia was the diabolical economic and political circumstances Iran found itself in following the cessation of the Iran-Iraq War in 1989. Iran’s economy was in a horrific state, and required considerable technical assistance and investment, furthermore the Iranian military was in dire need of rearmament after eight years of fierce combat and international arms embargos. Also feeding into Iranian calculations was the prospect of increased US regional encroachment. The Soviet Union was seen as a potential counterweight to American domination, and the agreements signed between Moscow and Tehran were viewed enthusiastically among the Iranian political elite as a first step on the road towards a “strategic partnership” between Iran and its giant, albeit rapidly-weakening northern neighbour, which could counteract American strategic encirclement and blunt the Central Asian inroads of the US and its close ally, Turkey. Therefore on the eve of the Soviet Union’s collapse, Moscow became a key source of weapons for Iran’s military, a critical technology provider in a number of different fields, a partner in Iran’s domestic economic redevelopment, and a potential strategic ally.

38 Former Minister. Recorded interview with author.
39 Mesbahi, ”Iran and Tajikistan,” 128.
40 Ibid., 111.
41 Furthermore, Iran was well aware of Russia’s geopolitical influence in Tajikistan and the wider region. According to Mesbahi, an anti-Russian agenda “on the part of Tehran [would] not serve Iran’s immediate and long-term interests”, and only added further roadblocks in front of Iranian political engagement. See ibid., 112. Just as important as these international considerations was the fact that domestically, the idea of
Only a month after Velayati’s visit to Dushanbe, the Soviet Union had taken its last gasp of breath and collapsed. With this development Iran scurried to immediately recognise Tajik independence. The inauguration of Iran’s new embassy on January 9, 1992 on the newly re-named “Tehran Street” was immediately followed up by a concerted Iranian effort to increase its economic and cultural influence within Tajikistan’s borders, both officially and “unofficially”. Deputy Foreign Minister Maleki and Ambassador Mojtabahed-Shabestari spearheaded Iran’s attempts to convince Tajik officials to switch from the Cyrillic alphabet script to the Arabic script in the hope of improving societal ties between the two “brotherly states”. This was backed by Iran’s provision of educational materials, which would assist Tajiks in the learning of the Arabic alphabet. A former conducting an assertive and politically risky foreign policy in the peripheral Central Asian state of Tajikistan was not something that appealed to either Iran’s political elite, or the public in general, and was not something that Rafsanjani even countenanced. For further discussion see Atkin, “Iran, Russia and Tajikistan's Civil War,” 370.

According to Parker, Iran had been beaten to the punch in recognising Azerbaijan by Turkey, and it was not going to let this happen again in respect to Tajikistan. See Parker, Persian Dreams, 48. Although a number of sources claim that Iran was the first country to recognise Tajikistan’s independence, this actually was not the case. Australia was the first to do so on the 26th of December 1991.

Tajiks had long taken pride in their Persian cultural roots and linguistic heritage, a pride which the Communist government duly acknowledged in 1989 by declaring Tajik as the official language of the republic, over the Russian language. A. Karpov, "Law on Language Ratified," Izvestia The News of the Week; Domestic Affairs; Volume XLI, No. 29 August 16, 1989 [Current Digest of the Soviet Press] 31. For further discussion see Muriel Atkin, “Tajikistan’s Relations with Iran and Afghanistan,” (Washington D.C.: The National Council for Soviet and East European Research, 1992), 4-6. Interestingly, the law included ‘Persian’ in parentheses with ‘Tajik’, thus acknowledging the commonality and interchangeability between these two mutually intelligible languages). The “Tajik S.S.R. Law on Language” also stipulated that the Tajik government would provide access to, and also facilitate the instruction of, the Arabic script, which would have assisted Tajiks in opening up their pre-Soviet past, and also leaving the door open for the possibility of changing the Tajik alphabet from Cyrillic to Arabic script in the future. See Jill E. Hickson, "Using Law to Create National Identity: The Course to Democracy in Tajikistan,” Texas International Law Journal 38(2003): 347-380

"Iran's Maleki on Expansion of Relations.” Furthermore, according to Atkin, “a member of the Iranian delegation also stated that his country planned to open a bookstore, to be called al-Hoda (the path to salvation) to sell Iranian works on literature, history, and culture”. As of 2013, this store was still in operation in the centre of Dushanbe, close to the Presidential administration building. See Muriel Atkin,
senior official, reminiscing on this exciting period of relations, gave a clear indication of Iran’s initial economic and cultural priorities in Tajikistan:

Really at that time I was responsible for this region and I did not [involve myself in questions of] ideology or political Islam or any of these issues, we [Iran’s Foreign Ministry] wanted to help them in the areas of culture, and economy...[and we] tried to assist in promoting Tajikistan’s membership to the United Nations. The first time the Tajik representative came to Tehran [I went with their delegation to the] UN [United Nations], then to ICRO [Islamic Culture and Relations Organisation] and also to the ECO [Economic Cooperation Organisation]. I also sought to assist Tajik officials in the areas of aviation, tax collection, customs procedures, exports, imports, insurance, and banking [–] these are the sort of issues that Iran [initially sought to provide assistance] to Tajikistan with.46

However, Iran’s emphasis on economic and cultural cooperation was driven by much more than the kind actions of a “brotherly” and “kindred” state genuinely interested in the wellbeing of its close cultural cousins. Rather, Iran’s actions were borne out of the strong geopolitical concerns of the Iranian political elite. In particular, there was a genuine fear that if Iran did not move quickly to secure its interests in Tajikistan and the wider Central Asian region, that it would be left behind in the scramble to influence the region’s political and economic trajectory.

Iran’s major international rival, the United States, directly, and through its proxy, Turkey, had made a strong effort from the outset of the collapse of the Soviet Union to marginalise and preclude Iran’s participation in regional developments. Turkey’s role, with the backing of the United States and its NATO partners, is described by Rashid, wherein: “The West pushed Turkey to play a modernizing and moderate role in Central Asia.”47 After a meeting in Washington on 13 February 1992, President George Bush and Turkish Prime Minister Suleyman Demirel pledged to expand aid and other help to Central Asia.

46 Former Minister. Recorded interview with author.

47 See Rashid, Resurgence of Central Asia, 210.
Bush pointed to Turkey as the model of a democratic, secular state which could be emulated by Central Asia. According to Rashid, “US companies were pushed by the US government to find Turkish partners with whom to do business in Central Asia”, and “US diplomats encouraged Central Asian politicians and bureaucrats to travel to Turkey to see a modern country at work”.\(^48\) Iranian fears regarding these efforts were apparent in an interview conducted with Iranian Ambassador to Tajikistan, Mojtahed-Shabestari, in early 1992. When asked by the interviewer about the increased engagement undertaken by the United States and Turkey in the region, Mojtahed-Shabestari bristled:

Because they [the United States] cannot expand their activities in Iran and Afghanistan, the Americans are concentrating their activities here [Tajikistan]. Turkey has begun extensive cultural and economic cooperation with the Muslim-inhabited Central Asian republics. Even though its activities in Tajikistan are not as extensive as in the other republics, they have increased recently and are expected to be further increased when the Turkish prime minister visits Dushanbe.\(^49\)

Mojtahed-Shabestari went on to declare that the United States and “other countries” (presumably Turkey) were trying to “drive a wedge” between Tajiks and their culture and religion. It was therefore up to Iran to preclude this from occurring, and “fortunately” since the Iranian embassy had opened

various cultural exchanges have been expedited...It would be appropriate to increase our budget for these exchanges. We should emphasize increasing the signal of the Voice and Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran, so that the thirsty people of Tajikistan can have access to them and can avoid the channels alien to their true Tajik culture.\(^50\)

This small-scale, “soft-power” rivalry between Iran and Turkey, and by extension the United States in Tajikistan, was at the same time occurring on a broader, much larger scale with both states seeking to woo the new Central Asian republics with the possibility

\(^48\) Ibid.


\(^50\) Ibid.
of increased economic, cultural, and political ties. For instance, while Turkey busily set about forging the Black Sea Economic Organisation, Iran set up its own rival organisations such as the Caspian Sea Organisation, and also the much smaller, Association of Persian Languages.\textsuperscript{51} Even within organisations where Iran and Turkey had displayed a history of collaboration (albeit on paper), such as within the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO), there was a rapid shift from cooperation to one of rivalry and cheap political point scoring, with both the Turks and Iranians only too willing to undercut each other’s regional agendas.\textsuperscript{52}

Iran’s enthusiasm to instigate close cultural and economic relations with Tajikistan—although encountering obstacles in the form of rival American and Turkish regional ambitions—was reciprocated by Nabieyv, who welcomed Iranian political support and consistently declared that Iran would be the first country he would visit as independent Tajikistan’s first president.\textsuperscript{53} Nabieyv’s positive stance towards Iran came despite pressure from the United States, who viewed the prospect of close Iranian-Tajik cooperation in cautious terms. During his visit to Dushanbe in February 1992, former US Secretary of State James Baker sought to gain a number of assurances from Tajikistan, and declared that the United States would not establish diplomatic relations with Dushanbe unless a


\textsuperscript{52} Rashid, \textit{Resurgence of Central Asia}, 213. In response to an interviewer’s remark relating to Iran and Turkey’s role in Central Asia, Turkish Prime Minister Demirel declared: “We are not competing with Iran.” However, he made clear that Turkey was the model that all the states of the region should be following, noting that: “We say to the inhabitants of the region that our model of development [in contradistinction to Iran] would be good for them because we are trying to achieve Western values which are synonymous with an improvement in living standards.” "Demirel Interviewed on Kurds, Ties with Europe,” \textit{Paris Le Figaro} April 13, 1992 [FBIS-WEU-92-073, Daily Report. West Europe, April 15, 1992] 40-42.

commitment was made to the Conference on Security and Cooperation’s (CSCE)\textsuperscript{54} key principles of

\begin{itemize}
  \item [O]pen, democratic elections; human rights, including minority rights; free emigration; accession to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty; accession to international conventions relating to weapons of mass destruction; strict export controls; a defensive military; and a free-market economy, with an agreement to pay a fair share of the financial commitments of the former Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{55}
\end{itemize}

Nabiev, it seems, was only too willing to tell the US Secretary of State exactly what he wanted to hear, and over the course of a two-hour meeting with Baker, Nabiev attempted to ingratiate himself and his country to his American visitor, ballyhooing the strategic importance and economic potential of a country and region of which Baker seemed to have very little knowledge before this visit.\textsuperscript{56} Nabiev wished to attract American investment and transform Tajikistan into a “market-based economy”, while also seeking to assure the US that it would clamp down and forbid the transfer of Soviet inherited nuclear expertise. After this blatant attempt at flattery Nabiev, coyly raised the prospect of Iranian-Tajik cooperation, and that Iran had recently shown “a lot of interest in Tajikistan”. According to Baker’s memoirs, he recoiled at Nabiev’s statement on Iran and loudly insisted to Nabiev that

\begin{quote}
the Iranian regime seeks to exploit its revolution… “one doesn’t need a crystal ball” to see why Iran might be interested in Tajikistan. “If asked for my advice on dealing with Iran,” I said bluntly, “I’d respond with two words: be careful”.\textsuperscript{57}
\end{quote}

Unfortunately for Baker, Nabiev didn’t ask for his advice, and simply nodded in assumed agreement and moved on to other matters.

\textsuperscript{54} Now known as the Organisation for Cooperation and Security in Europe (OSCE).


\textsuperscript{56} In Baker’s words while Moldova, Armenia, and Azerbaijan were all “unique”, the states of Central Asia were “truly exotic”. This exoticism seems to have stemmed from the greetings Baker often received at Central Asian airports from men dressed in “native costumes”. Ibid., 630.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 631.
Although Nabiev displayed an interest in developing ties with Iran, and consistently declared his admiration of Iran’s political, cultural, and economic development, the depth of his interest in establishing relations with Iran should not be overstated.\textsuperscript{58} As can be seen in the above exchange with US Secretary of State Baker, Nabiev was a cagey and pragmatic political actor who knew that on the international front, Iran could be a useful bargaining chip in any interaction with the US, and domestically he could marginalise his rivals by playing this same “Iran card”. This was due to the fact that Iran was viewed in mostly favourable terms within Tajik domestic society, particularly among nationalists who sought stronger cultural links with their Iranian “big-brother”, and with Islamists inspired by Iran’s Islamic Revolution.\textsuperscript{59} More importantly, however, Nabiev’s attempts to court Iran never came at the expense of Tajikistan’s broader regional ties. Nabiev was adamant that Tajikistan needed to develop good relations with all of its regional neighbours, pursuing a non-aligned policy, which would strengthen Tajikistan’s independence and allow it room for manoeuvre on the international stage. This was made abundantly clear by Nabiev when he declared in early 1992 that Tajik foreign policy would be based on “nonalignment and membership of no blocs. Our policy is one of open doors to the world. We will adhere to a policy of friendship and good-neighbourliness with all who share these principles.”\textsuperscript{60} Unfortunately for Nabiev the ability to craft such a sober external policy was exceedingly difficult in the early months of 1992, and his mishandling of Tajikistan’s internal political situation only further drove Tajikistan onto the path of war.\textsuperscript{61}

\textsuperscript{58} Atkin, “Iran, Russia and Tajikistan's Civil War,” 268.

\textsuperscript{59} For further discussion of the links between Tajikistan’s political parties and Iran see Atkin, “Tajikistan's Relations with Iran and Afghanistan,” 91-117.

\textsuperscript{60} “Nabiyev on Economy, Religion, Role in Cis,” \textit{Moscow Pravda} April 9, 1992 [FBIS-USR-92-050, FBIS REPORT. CENTRAL EURASIA, May 1, 1992] 101-104.

\textsuperscript{61} For an examination of Nabiev’s short presidency see Nourzhanov and Bleuer, \textit{Tajikistan: A Political and Social History}, 291-95.
Throughout the opening months of 1992, the Nabiev government began legal proceedings against a number of members of the DPT, Rastokhez, and the IRP, and also passed through new laws which would restrict press freedom and public assembly. These moves only added to the already extraordinary tension that existed between Tajikistan’s regional and political groupings. This marginalisation of the opposition reached its crescendo in March 1992, when Nabiev’s government arrested and sentenced a number of prominent opposition figures on at times ludicrous charges. In response opposition protesters began to mobilise in Shahidon Square, many of whom were bussed into the capital from outlying regions. The IRP quickly became the most prominent of opposition groups in Shahidon Square, due in no small part to the IRPs ability to call on an extensive network of supporters throughout rural areas and “mobilise support through mullahs at mosques and collective farms”.

Taking a maximalist position, the opposition voiced a number of demands, ranging from the dismissal of the chairman of the Supreme Soviet Safarali Kenjaev—whose sacking of the ethnic Pamiri Interior Ministry chief Mamadayoz Navjuvanov led to the first major anti-Government demonstrations—and the adoption of a new constitution, to the far-fetched call for Nabiev to resign. Unwilling to cave into what were a somewhat extreme set of demands, Nabiev and his government unfortunately only added further fuel to the opposition’s fire, organising their own pro-government, “anti-Islamist” (read anti-Gharmi,

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62 Ibid., 295-302. However, it was the public investigation and admonishment of the Ministry of Interior chief, Mamadayoz Navjuvanov—an ethnic Pamiri—by chairman of the Supreme Soviet Safarali Kenjaev—a Khojandi—which brought protesters onto the streets of Dushanbe. The very public sacking of Navjuvanov struck to the core of Pamiri feelings of national marginalisation and humiliation, and led to several hundred Pamiri members of the opposition group La’li Badakhshon to mobilise and begin demonstrating in Shahidon Square against the Nabiev government. See Akiner, Tajikistan: Disintegration or Reconciliation?, 36; Bess A. Brown, "The Civil War in Tajikistan, 1992-1993," 90; Bess A. Brown, "Whither Tajikistan?," RFE/RL Research Report, June 12, 1992.

63 Nourzhanov and Bleuer, Tajikistan: A Political and Social History, 296.

64 Ibid., 297.

and Pamiri) demonstration in Ozodi Square, made up predominately of Kulobis. As both demonstrations continued to grow in size and disorder. As the stand-off dragged on throughout March, Nabiev became increasingly impotent, and the opposition received a major shot in the arm with Tajikistan’s spiritual leader and the highest official Islamic clerical representative, Qozikalon Akbar Turajonzoda, and six Sufi leaders offering their support for the opposition.

The legitimation of the opposition by Tajikistan’s religious elite created deep unease within the Nabiev government, who granted the opposition a number of concessions and caved into many of their demands, which finally brought an end to the opposition protests. However these steps to bring about a peaceful solution to the political gridlock afflicting Tajikistan had the inverse effect, with pro-government supporters now demanding the rescindment of the concessions made to the opposition. Reassured by the scale of the pro-government protests taking place in Ozodi Square, and believing they had the upper hand over the opposition, the Nabiev government appointed the key actor in this ongoing drama, Kenjaev, to chair the State Security Committee (the KGB’s successor). Kenjaev only a week earlier had resigned as chairman of the Supreme Soviet, thus fulfilling a key opposition demand. The ill-conceived appointment of Kenjaev led to the resumption of opposition protests in Shahidon Square, which were now larger and more intense than at any period during March and April of 1992. By the end of April as many as 100,000 people were on the streets of Dushanbe, with the two opposing

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66 Akiner, Tajikistan: Disintegration or Reconciliation?, 37.

67 The protests by this stage became so disruptive that the new session of the Tajik Supreme Soviet, which began on 11 April 1992 was immediately suspended. See Nourzhanov and Bleuer, Tajikistan: A Political and Social History, 299.

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid., 300.
demonstrations joined by a third protest of almost 7,000 university students and Dushanbe residents in Ayni Square, calling for the cessation of the first two demonstrations.\textsuperscript{70}

Throughout April, 1992 there was a rapid militarisation on all sides, with the proliferation of private armies and militias centring on key regime and opposition strongmen, adding another dangerous dimension to Tajikistan’s political stalemate. Nabiev himself was complicit in this alarming development, creating his own “national guard” which would report directly to him, largely made up of an estimated 400 to 3,000 mainly Kulobi demonstrators in Ozodi Square, equipped with small arms appropriated from military supply depots.\textsuperscript{71} On May 5, violent conflict erupted with several people killed at a roadblock outside of Dushanbe. It was not long before shootings, pitched battles, and killings took place in the centre of Dushanbe. During the night the opposition, better organised than Nabiev’s rag-tag, so-called national guard, took over the presidential palace, the state television building, Dushanbe’s central railway station, and blocked all main thoroughfares into the capital. Chaos ensued as Soviet deputies were taken hostage, government ministers fled the city, and the president took refuge in the Supreme Soviet building, protected by the Commonwealth of Independent States’ (CIS) 201\textsuperscript{st} Motorised Rifle Division (MRD). In this confusion soldiers, police officers, and internal security members took sides with many joining the opposition, bringing their weapons with them.\textsuperscript{72}

Russian military officers of the 201\textsuperscript{st} MRD, shocked by the scale of violence taking place, attempted to negotiate a truce between the opposing forces, threatening the arrest of leaders of both sides if an agreement could not be reached.\textsuperscript{73} On May 7, a preliminary

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 301.

\textsuperscript{71} It is estimated that more than 1,700 Kalashnikov rifles were handed to the demonstrators of Ozodi Square. See Khaidarov and Inomov, \textit{Tajikistan: Tragedy and Anguish of the Nation}, 35; Akiner, \textit{Tajikistan: Disintegration or Reconciliation?}, 37.

\textsuperscript{72} Nourzhanov and Bleuer, \textit{Tajikistan: A Political and Social History}, 307.

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 308.
agreement for a coalition Government of National Reconciliation (GNR) was struck with all the main government and opposition leaders signing the deal. It included the dissolution of Nabiev’s national guards, the removal of road and infrastructure blockades, the halting of investigations of opposition figures, and most importantly the breaking up and ending of all demonstrations. On May 11, Nabiev’s earlier accession to the preliminary accord went even further, whereby he agreed to give eight of the 24 executive cabinet positions to the opposition. Although only a third of the cabinet seats were gifted to the opposition, the seats that were given represented what was a significant tilt towards opposition control over the organs of central power, with the opposition assuming authority over the state’s security apparatuses, and a number of its decision-making bodies. It was clear that Nabiev and his Khojandi-Kulobi backers had lost out to the opposition74, and the Ozodi Square demonstrators made a hasty retreat (with their weapons) out of Dushanbe, with many heading to Kulob.75 Using Nabiev as a figurehead, the opposition quickly set about purging the government of pro-incumbent officials, filling the vacuum left by what was largely a Khojandi and Kulobi-dominated government with Gharmis and Pamiris, a process which again highlighted the regional basis of the Tajik conflict, despite the ideological pretensions of the opposition group’s leaders, democrat and Islamist alike.76

Despite the formation of a government of national “reconciliation”, Tajikistan continued to be gripped by heavy fighting between the opposing political and regional factions. Almost overnight a Tajik’s region of origin became “a matter of life or death as militias and even neighbours began to kill based on a person’s origin”.77 Shockingly, an unnamed

74 Kuzmin believed that the deal was not a power-sharing agreement but instead constituted the ‘fall of the Nabiev regime’. See A.I. Kuzmin, ”Tajikistan: The Causes and Lessons of the Civil War,” in Central Asia: Political and Economic Challenges in the Post-Soviet Era, ed. Alexei Vassiliev (London: Saqi Books, 2001), 189.

75 Ibid., 89.

76 Nourzhanov and Bleuer, Tajikistan: A Political and Social History, 311.

77 Ibid., 323.
combatant highlighted the immense cruelty of the conflict, declaring that there were “no rules” and that “the wounded were not spared, and prisoners were not taken”.\textsuperscript{78} Although nominally headed up by Nabiev—a Khojandi—the GNR was in many respects a Pamiri-Gharmi politico-regional cabal, and was rejected by the majority of the inhabitants of the Hisor, Khojang, and Kulob regions who continued to support the former Communist/regionalist status quo. The inhabitants of these regions, in particular those in Kulob, had in the preceding months thrown their hefty support behind the incumbent government, and were only too willing to take up arms against their former neighbours and co-nationals. Both sides began to engage in “population cleansings”, which included the sickening wholesale murder and displacement of minority regional groups.\textsuperscript{79} By June 1992, Dushanbe was little more than a glorified refugee camp, housing tens of thousands of refugees, mainly Gharmis fleeing from Kulob and Qurghonteppa.\textsuperscript{80} While the GNR controlled Dushanbe and the regions of the GBAO and Gharm, the concept of central control had virtually collapsed and the government had become largely irrelevant. Instead it was the barrel of the gun, and the capabilities of regional warlords, that was the order of the day. The uneasy power-sharing agreement that existed throughout 1992 was a farce, with not only fighting among the former opposition and the incumbent members, but also within the opposition itself.\textsuperscript{81} Instead of attempting to reconcile and work together on their differences, the hastily cobbled together coalition government used their positions of power to further enable their supporters to wreak havoc throughout the country.

\textsuperscript{78} Quoted in Kuzmin, “Tajikistan: The Causes and Lessons of the Civil War,” 190.

\textsuperscript{79} In a very short period of time whole regions and districts became ‘homogenised’. Gharmis were expelled from Kulob, and Kulobis were driven from Gharm. In areas such as Qurghonteppa, where there was no clear regional majority, internecine warfare took place between Gharmis, Kulobis, and ethnic Uzbeks. Refugees streamed out of this district returning to their home regions, Afghanistan, or the capital. See Nourzhanov and Bleuer, Tajikistan: A Political and Social History, 325-26.

\textsuperscript{80} Parker, Persian Dreams, 67.

\textsuperscript{81} Although the so-called Tajik ‘opposition’ gained control over the Tajik government, they will continue to be referred to as the opposition. Those groups who continued to support the Communist status quo will be referred to as the pro-incumbents.
President Nabiev ruled in name only, and by September of 1992 he had resigned and was forced from office at gunpoint. Following Nabiev’s capitulation, Akbarsho Iskandarov—an ethnic Pamiri—stood in as acting president, instigating efforts to broker a ceasefire with the rival Kulobi-Khojandi regional bloc. However, the Kulobis and Khojandis had very little appetite for negotiations, as they rapidly sought to reel back the gains of the opposition, with Iskandarov promptly resigning on November 10. Fighting under the banner of the Popular Front, the Khojandis and Kulobis had by December 1992 overrun Dushanbe, ousting the opposition forces in an attempt to reimpose the pre-GNR status quo. Dushanbe quickly descended into an orgy of violence, with the Popular Front seeking retribution, committing wholesale violence upon the Gharmi and Pamiri populations who had remained in the city.

 Following the capitulation of Dushanbe, a little-known former Kholkoz director, Emomali Rahmon (then Rahmonov) from the

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82 Holed up and besieged by his opponents at Dushanbe’s airport, Nabiev was forced to resign under duress by criminal elements, known as the “youth of Dushanbe”. Under the guidance of the leaders of the IRP and DPT, this group of young hoodlums held Nabiev hostage at gunpoint. In such circumstances it is easy to understand why Nabiev signed a hastily cobbled-together “statement of resignation”. Kuzmin, “Tajikistan: The Causes and Lessons of the Civil War,” 190.

83 Following the resignation of Iskandarov and his government, the 26th Session of the Supreme Soviet was held in the city of Khojand, far from the fighting taking place around the capital and the south of the country. Among other decisions made, the session elected Emomali Rahmon as the chair of the legislature and the head of state. None of the ministers involved in the GNR agreement were given ministries, instead every ministry would be headed by Kulobis or Khojandis. See Shahram Akbarzadeh, “Why Did Nationalism Fail in Tajikistan?,“ Europe-Asia Studies 48, no. 7 (1996): 1113.

84 The Popular Front was made up largely of Kulobis and was led by a noted criminal, Sangak Safarov. The group had strong support from Khojand and was heavily backed by Uzbekistan (with Russia, who had grown increasingly tired of the conflict, supported Uzbekistan’s position on the Popular Front) who provided heavy weaponry, aviation support, and even regular army units to assist the Popular Front, making short work of the opposition’s rag-tag forces. By the spring of 1993 the pro-incumbent forces, spearheaded by the Popular Front, controlled 90 percent of Tajikistan’s territory. See Nourzhanov and Bleuer, Tajikistan: A Political and Social History, 328; Kuzmin, “Tajikistan: The Causes and Lessons of the Civil War,” 191.

85 Nourzhanov and Bleuer, Tajikistan: A Political and Social History, 328.

86 Rahmon, a client of the warlord Sangak Safarov, had risen fast in the preceding months, promoted from a sovkhoz chairman to the Kulob chairmanship—a post he held for only a month before being thrust into the most powerful position in Tajikistan. Although initially seen as a weak and malleable leader who was nothing more than Safarov’s puppet, Rahmon managed to outwit his allies and enemies alike and
district of Kulob was installed as chairman of the Supreme Soviet—a position which in
effect made him the de-facto leader of Tajikistan. Rahmon, with the support of Kulobi
warlords and external backers Russia and Uzbekistan, quickly set about consolidating
power, marginalising enemies and allies alike, and extending central control beyond
Dushanbe’s city limits; a slow, violent and messy process, which culminated in a low-
level, yet extremely cruel conflict that continued until 1997.  

4.3 Iran’s Role in the Violent Events of 1992

The violence of 1992 is arguably one of the most controversial and divisive periods of
Iran’s early involvement in post-Soviet Tajikistan. A number of authors have asserted
to varying degrees that Iran was in fact a key force behind the outbreak of the civil war
in Tajikistan in May 1992. On the other hand there is a “remarkable consensus” of
authors and observers who hold that Iran either could not, or did not, play an active role
in the terrible events of 1992. This split within the literature is also borne out in the
author’s personal interviews and discussions that took place in Dushanbe and Tehran in
2013, where a number of key actors and observers who had first-hand experience of the
Tajik Civil War displayed a highly divergent, yet entrenched set of positions on Iran’s
involvement in the events that led to the civil war. Although this is the case and the biases
remains president of Tajikistan to the time of writing. Akbarzadeh, "Why Did Nationalism Fail in
Tajikistan?," 1113.

87 Low-level conflict continued to take place from the end of 1992, until the signing of the 1997 peace
accords in the remote mountainous areas of Gharm and Tavildara, and in the Afghan border regions of
Kulob and Qurghonteppa. See Nourzhanov and Bleuer, Tajikistan: A Political and Social History, 329.

88 Parker, Persian Dreams, 69; Rashid, Resurgence of Central Asia, 181; Kuzmin, "Tajikistan: The
Causes and Lessons of the Civil War," 175-219; Khaidarov and Inomov, Tajikistan: Tragedy and Anguish
of the Nation, 17.

89 Sergei Gretsky, "Civil War in Tajikistan and Its International Repercussions," Critique: Journal for
Critical Studies of the Middle East Spring, no. 6 (1995): 17.

90 See for example, Roy, The Civil War; Hunter, "Iran's Pragmatic Regional Policy. 133-47; Atkin,
"Iran, Russia and Tajikistan's Civil War," 361-76; Mesbahi, "Iran and Central Asia: Paradigm and Policy";
"Tajikistan, Iran, and the International Politics of the ‘Islamic Factor’, 141-58; Akiner, Tajikistan:
Disintegration or Reconciliation?
of those interviewed must be accounted for, a clear picture of Iranian involvement in Tajikistan throughout 1992 does emerge from the existing literature, and is supplemented by the aforementioned interviews.

In the early months of 1992, Iran did not play a direct role in the instigation of protests that eventually spiralled into violent conflict and ripped Tajikistan apart for more than five years, despite the often loud, albeit sporadic, views to the contrary.\footnote{For example, the former Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, James Woolsey, during a US Senate Intelligence Committee Hearing in January 1994, stated that: “Terrorism remains a central tool for Iran’s leaders in seeking to accomplish these objectives, and Iranian support for Hizballah and other such groups from Algeria to Tajikistan has not abated.” Effectively Woolsey linked Iran’s so-called ideologically-driven approach taken in the Middle East context to its policies in Tajikistan. See US Select Committee of Intelligence, \textit{Current and Projected National Security Risks to the United States and Its Interests Abroad}, (Washington D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1994), 8.} The impetus for these protests and the concomitant violence was solely derived from the domestic local and political dynamics as described above, and cannot and should not be placed at the feet of any external party, whether that be Iran, Russia, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, or Pakistan. Iran did however seek to surreptitiously increase its influence and make political gains during the chaos unfolding on the streets of Dushanbe that began in March 1992, as did all the other aforementioned external parties. This influence, like most of Iran’s foreign policies was reactive, opportunistic, and multifaceted.

On an official level, Iran’s embassy in Dushanbe repeatedly insisted that negotiations needed to take place between the opposition factions throughout the March cycle of protests. The spectre of violent conflict between the opposing forces had been so concerning to Tehran that—according to a former Iranian diplomatic official—President Rafsanjani, made a personal phone call to Nabiev pleading with him to negotiate with the opposition in full and open terms, and attempted to relay to Nabiev the threat that conflict in Tajikistan posed not only to the Tajik people, but also the whole region. Rafsanjani even offered his own services in mediating between the two parties—an offer that was
firmly rejected. This offer was again repeated by Rafsanjani during Nabiev’s visit to Tehran in June 1992, however Nabiev continued to reject Iran’s offers of mediation. Nabiev’s June 1992 visit to Iran is often cited as a key example of Iran’s close ties with Tajikistan’s government during this period of upheaval. However, the opposition had been very critical of Nabiev’s foreign policy, particularly of his efforts to build ties with Iran, which they felt did not go far enough, and it appears that Nabiev’s June visit to Iran—that took place while fighting continued to rage in his country—was used as a means to silence the criticism of his opposition partners. However, this effort backfired, with his opposition partners unwilling to join him on the trip to Iran, which only further isolated Nabiev and gave off the obvious impression that he was politically isolated and lacked coalition support as president of the republic. Furthermore, despite the fact that a range of agreements in the fields of trade, banking, finance, culture, and science were signed, and that Iran pledged to provide Tajikistan with $50 million in aid, Nabiev was lame-duck president who oversaw a country that lacked central control, and a leader who had very little ability to fully wield the benefits of independence. His visit should be viewed in such light, and its significance should not be over-exaggerated. In fact, Nabiev came to grow extremely suspicious of Iran, whom he believed was heavily supporting his political rivals, a suspicion which he confirmed following his ouster in September 1992.

92 Former Iranian Diplomat. Personal communication with author.

93 Mesbahi, "Iran and Tajikistan," 130; Khaidarov and Inomov, Tajikistan: Tragedy and Anguish of the Nation, 27. In an interview, Nabiev expressed his displeasure at those movements and individuals who “did not want to improve the situation” in Tajikistan, and “for reasons unknown” did not take part in the trip to Iran. See "Nabiyev Interviewed on Iran, Pakistan Trips," 75-76; Maqsudal Hasan Nuri, “Tajikistan in the 1990s,” Spotlight on Regional Affairs XV, no. 9 (1996): 14.

94 When asked how strong the opposition’s military position was in Dushanbe by a journalist, Nabiev bristled: “You know perfectly well that they are getting help from Afghanistan and Iran.” “Ex-President Nabiyev on Situation in Republic,” Moscow Nezavisimaya Gazeta November 3, 1992 [FBIS-SOV-92-214, Daily Report. Central Eurasia, November 4, 1992] 61.
For its part, Iran was clearly apprehensive regarding Tajikistan’s domestic situation, and its consistent calls for mediation pointed to the fact that there was awareness in Tehran that the GNR status quo, with Nabiev at the helm, could not and would not hold for long. However, while calling for mediation, Iran was also playing a double game, ensuring that it was in a strong position to benefit from the possibility that Nabiev would be ousted. Iran felt its political interests could be best served by supporting an opposition whose groups made no secret of their admiration for Iran, and throughout early 1992 Iran attempted to further cultivate its ties and “unofficial” relations with the opposition groups, a fact that is confirmed by a number of sources, particularly Russians and Tajiks who were on the ground in Dushanbe at this time. One of the most prominent of these sources was Safarali Kenjaev, who asserted that the Iranian embassy funneled almost 1.5 million roubles to Turajonzoda alone from July to November 1992. Although this is not a large sum, due to the poor exchange rate for the rouble at the time, Kenjaev believed that Iranian funds were sufficient enough to allow opposition leaders to purchase weapons and other inventory. According to Russian Foreign Ministry officials, Iran had provided

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95 See Safarali Kenjaev, *Perevorot V Tadzhikistane [Upheaval in Tajikistan]* vol. 1 (Dushanbe: Dushanbinkiy Poligrafkombinat, 1996), cited in Parker, *Persian Dreams*, 71. Kuzmin, quoting the *Novoe Vremya* weekly, claimed that in only 50 days Iran had spent up to $10 million in supporting the protests in Shahidon Square. See Kuzmin, "Tajikistan: The Causes and Lessons of the Civil War," 188. Adding to these Russian accounts is that of former Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Anatoly Adamishin, who declared that: “At the beginning of the turmoil the Iranians were quite active: they were the first to open the embassy and their diplomats were seen handing out cash to Tajiks. Tehran surely had nothing against planting an obedient government in Dushanbe.” See Anatoly Adamishin, "Tajikistan: Lessons of Reconciliation," *Russia in Global Affairs*, (October 7, 2012). http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/Tajikistan-Lessons-of-Reconciliation-15695, accessed February 11, 2015. Aside from these Russian views an interesting eyewitness account is given by Rashid who claims: “In October [1992] when the entire foreign diplomatic corps from six countries resident in Dushanbe numbered around 20 diplomats, the Iranian mission alone comprised 21 official diplomats and some 50 unofficial diplomats….At Dushanbe’s central mosque, teachers at the new madressa built by Qazi [Turajonzoda] proudly claimed that the building has been built with Iranian funds, that their salaries were paid by Teheran.” However, Rashid goes on to note that Iran was pursuing a “broad-based policy” supporting not just one group or actor, but all sides in the knowledge “no one party had either the mandate or the military clout to assert itself across the country”. See Rashid, *Resurgence of Central Asia*, 180-81.
significant funding to the opposition groups in Shahidon Square in March 1992, and on a number of occasions Russian intelligence services had caught Iranian agents “red-handed” seeking to assist the opposition protest groups through the provision of aid and other funds. This support should not be considered far-fetched, and is confirmed by a former Iranian Foreign Ministry official who advised the author that Iran did indeed provide food and provisions to the opposition protests. However in conceding this, he also pointed out that Iran also provided similar support to groups that were generally pro-incumbent in their political outlook. However, a former advisor to President Rahmon went even further than most observers, claiming that Iran’s support for the opposition while Nabiev was in power throughout 1992 went well beyond aid in the form of food and basic provisions. Instead the advisor declared that:

[N]obody acknowledges that the war started with the initiative of Iran. The essence of this is that after the collapse of the Soviet Union the Iranian politicians attempted to win the influence over our religious leaders and create in Tajikistan a state similar to the Iranian model. Therefore they were provided with the religious literature and weaponry. This helped our opposition to gain power, and relying on Iran, to create in and outside of Tajikistan armed formations. This led to the civil war.

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96 Iranian support of these protests was placed into sharp relief by the fact that many of the protesters were chanting proto-Iranian slogans, and holding placards that included terms such as “Death to America” [Marg ba Amriko] and other pro-Iranian revolutionary slogans. Although symbolic, according to a number of authors and observers these actions were little more than “haphazard and reactive sloganism” that was grassroots in nature, rather than inspired by outsiders. See Mesbahi, “Iran and Tajikistan,” 121. This was also considered to be the case by a prominent Tajik scholar who believed that the slogans and actions of the protests in Shahidon Square reflected “confusion” among the protesters rather than strong support for an Iranian-like revolution. Independent Historian. Recorded interview with author, Dushanbe, May 31, 2013.

97 In Parker’s interviews with Russian Foreign Ministry officials there were a number of claims that Iran had provided significant funds to the opposition and when caught, the Russian government would take the evidence directly to the Iranian Foreign Ministry, “which of course denied any wrongdoing”. See Parker, Persian Dreams, 74.

98 The official gave the example of Iran providing aid to Kulobis who had been starving due to an opposition blockade of their region in 1992. Former Iranian foreign ministry official. Recorded interview with author.

This view was consistently rebuffed by Iranian officials interviewed, with a former diplomatic official strongly denying such suggestions as baseless and “sheer nonsense”.\textsuperscript{100} Although there is the possibility that despite the public pronouncements of Iranian officials such as Deputy Foreign Minister Mahmoud Va’ez\textsuperscript{101}i, who denied that Iran supplied weapons to the opposition, Iran did in fact do so.\textsuperscript{101} However, confirming this is almost impossible, and if Iran was providing weapons it was unlikely to have been to the extent that is claimed by elites in Moscow, and would have been limited at best.\textsuperscript{102} Iran had neither the capacity nor the inclination to provide so much support, and many of the weapons the opposition seem to have acquired were from the same military stores as those used by the pro-government forces, with many former soldiers and interior officials defecting to the opposition in the early months of 1992. Furthermore, a stream of weapons and other equipment from bordering war-torn Afghanistan would have been much easier for the Tajik opposition to obtain.

Adding further difficulties in understanding Iran’s actual support of the opposition throughout 1992 is the fact that even within Iran’s government itself there were divergent interests and forces at play when it came to Tajikistan. In the author’s discussions with the former Iranian Foreign Ministry official, an interesting anecdote relating to the complexity and dual tracks of Iran’s foreign policy was made. According to this official, Iran’s Foreign Ministry placed its support behind all opposition elements, whether they were nationalist, democratic, or Islamist, however at the same time Iran’s Ministry of

\textsuperscript{100} Former Iranian Diplomat. Personal communication with author.

\textsuperscript{101} According to Va’ez\textsuperscript{i}, a number of Tajik political groups asked Iran to ship weapons, however Iran refused the request. “Iran Refuses to Ship Arms to Tajik Political Groups,” \textit{Moscow ITAR-TASS} October 28, 1992 [FBIS-SOV-92-211, Daily Report. Central Eurasia, October 30, 1992] 11.

\textsuperscript{102} For instance, despite having “no reliable sources on the ground” former Russian Foreign Minister, Andrey Kozyrev claimed that the “chorus of accusations” flowing from “every” Central Asian leader had persuaded him that Iranian money and weapons were flowing to the opposition in Tajikistan. Quoted in Parker, \textit{Persian Dreams}, 84.
Information (The Ministry of Intelligence and National Security - MOIS) was also providing its own backing and support solely to the Islamist elements of the opposition in the hope they would eventually gain power over the secular, democratic, and nationalist opposition elements. In the words of the foreign ministry official:

The divergent policies of the Ministry of Information and the Foreign Ministry did not cause a split [or conflict] between the ministries—we all wanted to keep the opposition government in power against the former Communists [following the GNR agreement], however there was a preference, particularly within the Ministry of Information for the IRP leaders to have a bigger role in the provisional government [GNR], nevertheless this support was mainly financial and did not despite the accusations of the West include the supply of weapons.103

These comments only further illustrate the complex and multifaceted nature of Iran’s foreign policies, and the fact that Iran did not even have a coherent approach towards the opposition itself, let alone Tajikistan more broadly.

On the question of Iran’s support of Islamism and the IRP in Tajikistan, it is clear that Iran’s elites were aware of the possibilities of expanding their Islamic revolutionary influence in Tajikistan, and as noted above there were elements within the MOIS who wanted the IRP to take a greater role in Tajik political life. However, the idea that Iran supported the IRP purely due to ideological considerations should be debunked. Iranian elites were well aware of the ideological fissures that existed between their Shi’a Islamic Revolution and the Sunni-inspired ideology of the IRP, and that the IRP was basically a Gharm-based regional faction using religion as an ideological shield for its own narrow material and regional interests.104 Iran’s support for the IRP was based not on the fact that it was the most ideological, but rather because it was the strongest of the opposition groups, with the best chance of succeeding in the conflict among the opposition and pro-incumbent forces. If anything, Iran’s support for the IRP throughout 1992 was undeniably

103 Former Iranian foreign ministry official. Recorded interview with author.

104 For a history of why the IRP found most of its support within the Gharm district see Mullojonov, "The Islamic Clergy in Tajikistan since the End of the Soviet Period," 221-268.
sober and pragmatic, and punctuated by a healthy dose of political scepticism. As highlighted by Mesbahi, Iran’s “overall policy” towards the opposition and in particular its apparent support of the IRP could be “characterised as sceptical optimism, reflecting scepticism in practice and substance and optimism in the realm of possibilities”. Mesbahi goes on further to declare that between May and October 1992, Iran could have “easily exploited” the IRP’s wish to establish an Islamic state. However, Iran’s support of the IRP was “hesitant if not passive” and this hesitation was a reflection of Iran’s awareness that the “clash in Tajikistan, as elsewhere in Central Asia, while couched in ideological terms, reflected tribal, regional, and ethnic differences, rather than an immediate receptivity to an Islamic alternative.” In the bluntest of terms, a former Iranian statesman with significant first-hand diplomatic experience in Tajikistan and Central Asia summed up the Tajik Civil War as follows: “That war in Tajikistan was a village conflict! It had nothing to do with Islam!” The official went on to declare that although there were “of course Muslim forces” involved in the conflict, overall the Tajik Civil War had nothing to do with any “Communism versus Islam dynamic”. It seems as 1992 wore on this view became the ascendant one in Tehran, and as the pro-incumbent forces began to reconsolidate their power Iran was unwilling to back the IRP’s somewhat flimsy Islamist agendas to the extent it required to truly rule Tajikistan. This view is highlighted by noted expert Roy, who states that Iran’s relationship with the IRP was based on a double misunderstanding. According to Roy, “the IRP was never ready to enter the fold of the Iranian revolution or to become a tool of Iran’s regional strategy. On the other hand, Iran’s support for the IRP was limited by its wish not to antagonise either Russia or the Turkic republics. For Iran, Tajikistan was a figure in a far broader picture.”

105 Mesbahi, "Iran and Tajikistan," 126.
106 Ibid.
107 Former Iranian Ambassador. Personal communication with author.
108 Roy, The Foreign Policy, 15.
In sum, throughout the period of heaviest fighting and political upheaval of 1992, Iran was neither the omnipresent force of ill behind every opposition deed, nor was it an innocent and completely neutral actor that many of its leaders claim. The truth it seems is somewhere in between. In similar respects to most other contexts and circumstances when analysing Iran, its actions should neither be overstated, nor understated. However, after extensive discussions with both Iranian and Tajik observers, it can be concluded that Iran did provide financial assistance to a limited extent to the opposition, namely those linked to the IRP. But Iran’s support for a so-called Islamic revolution in Tajikistan was half-hearted at best. Iran was not driven by ideological concerns. Instead its leaders supported the groups that would best forward Iran’s political and strategic interests, which just happened to be the IRP. Indeed it could be argued that if Rastokhez, a pro-Iranian cultural organisation, was as well organised as the IRP, Iran would have thrown the weight of its support behind it.

Further, the claim that Iran was directly providing weapons to the opposition is one that cannot be substantiated, and is a moot point nonetheless due to the fact that the opposition could have used Iranian financial assistance to buy weapons smuggled from Afghanistan anyway. Iran’s support should not be overstated, and cannot be considered to have been at a level to have drastically changed the events and outcomes of 1992 in Tajikistan, processes which were almost entirely indigenous in nature. It is also just as unlikely that Iran was simply acting in a charitable manner, providing food and blankets to the “oppressed” opposition groups and their supporters.109 Accepting such a view would be naïve in the extreme. Without a doubt, in the early months of 1992 Iran wanted the

109 Khaidarov and Inomov are particularly scathing in their assessment of Iran’s support of the opposition. According to their account, Iran paid for “independent” Tajik journalists to travel to Iran and also provided stipends, while all supporters who protested in Shahidon Square were paid for by Iran. Furthermore, “Iranian businessmen “tried to win over public opinion to their side. They often established contacts with representatives of anti-government parties and movements…..According to witnesses [Iran’s] Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary associated with representatives of the opposition, employees of the kaziat [Akbar Turajonzoda] more often than he did with the employees of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Tajikistan.” Khaidarov and Inomov, Tajikistan: Tragedy and Anguish of the Nation, 26.
opposition to defeat the pro-incumbent opposition forces, and—as noted by one former Tajik government official—Iran’s support of the opposition was sufficient enough to provide it “with the oxygen to survive and carry out its activities”\footnote{In particular, Iran’s alleged support of the IRP was seen as a major factor in its eventual dominant role in the opposition. Tajik International Relations Scholar, Recorded interview with author, Dushanbe, May 20, 2013.} and despite the denials of Iranian officials, some credence should at least be given to such views.

4.4 Iran, the ‘Defeat’ of the Opposition, and Rahmon

The Popular Front’s victory over the opposition in late 1992, with the support of Russia and Uzbekistan, instigated deep soul-searching in Tehran.\footnote{Gretsky, "Civil War in Tajikistan and Its International Repercussions," 9.} It was apparent that not enough material support or ideological guidance was given to the opposition, and it seems that Iran was never really willing (or capable) of providing the support the opposition required. Instead, when the opposition needed Iran the most, it wasn’t there. Had Iran been willing or able to provide adequate support to the opposition, a new regime under Rahmon, and a posse of Kulobi warlords deeply hostile towards Iran, may not have firmly entrenched themselves in Dushanbe, and pushed the opposition out of Tajikistan into a northern Afghanistan exile.

Iranian leaders were fully aware that by the end of 1992 there was no chance of the opposition taking control of the Tajik state, particularly in the face of Russia\footnote{Between 1991 and 1992, key democratic figures in the Kremlin strongly supported the opposition groups, particularly the Democrats. However, as the former Soviet nomenclature and bureaucracy began to gain ascendency within Russian domestic politics, Russia’s support shifted to the Tajik pro-incumbent forces. See Isabella Jean and Parviz Mullojonov, "Conflict and Peacebuilding in Tajikistan," (Cambridge: CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, 2008), 17-18.} and Uzbekistan’s military support of the Popular Front, which included the supply and use of heavy military equipment by Uzbekistan, and the eventual deployment of Russian troops upon Tajikistan’s Afghan border; a move which only further stifled the opposition’s ability to challenge the Tajik government. Iran felt that Moscow in particular had too
readily taken the military route in dealing with the conflict in Tajikistan, and its patronage of the Popular Front would only further contribute to the destabilisation of Tajikistan, and that a political solution would eventually be required to end the conflict.\textsuperscript{113} Furthermore, Iran was unimpressed with the role of Uzbekistan, who under leader Islam Karimov had made a number of inflammatory statements against Iran, which were viewed in Tehran as nothing more than an oleaginous attempt by Uzbekistan to ingratiate itself with the US and further isolate Iran from the region.\textsuperscript{114}

In response to the growing influence of Russia and Uzbekistan in Tajikistan, Iran on a number of occasions in late 1992 and early 1993 offered its services in attempting to resolve the conflict in Tajikistan, suggesting a joint Russian-Iranian peace initiative which was rejected outright by both Rahmon and the Boris Yeltsin-led Russian government, who viewed the conflict as good as over “except for the shouting”, and strongly criticised Tehran for its foolhardy embrace of an opposition that they believed had been soundly defeated on the battlefield.\textsuperscript{115} In these circumstances, Iran knew that it was critical to keep the opposition afloat if it was to maintain any semblance of influence in Tajikistan moving forward, and was “the only way of convincing the Dushanbe regime and its regional supporters to take the opposition seriously”.\textsuperscript{116} This support would engender a difficult balancing act for Tehran. For instance, if Iran provided too much support to the opposition, or openly and aggressively undermined Tajikistan’s new regime, its substantive links with Moscow—which had already been placed in jeopardy in the preceding months by Iran’s

\textsuperscript{113} Lynch, “The Tajik Civil War and Peace Process,” 55.

\textsuperscript{114} An example of this rhetoric can be seen in "Karimov Claims Iran Implicated in Tajik Events,” 

\textsuperscript{115} According to Parker, “Tehran was determined to bankroll opposition militias until their successes on the battlefield forced Dushanbe and its Russian patron into accepting the IRP’s return as a player in Tajik politics. Yet as long as Iran toned down its open aggressiveness in Tajikistan, Russia and Tajikistan’s Central Asian neighbours appeared willing to let Iran try to expand its commercial and cultural presence throughout the region.” Parker, \textit{Persian Dreams}, 84-85.

\textsuperscript{116} Mesbahi, “Iran and Tajikistan,” 129.
support of the opposition—could be permanently damaged, thus impacting Iran’s broader regional position. Furthermore, if Iran did not provide enough support to the opposition, it would be pilloried at home, and have its legitimacy as the centre for worldwide Islamic activism increasingly questioned, something that had already occurred with the radical Iranian press attacking Rafsanjani and the foreign ministry’s “mishandling” of the situation in Tajikistan. This political dilemma only further highlighted Iran’s caution, adaptability, and the flexibility it had displayed from the outset of Tajikistan’s independence and slide into civil war.

The opposition at the end of 1992 was in tatters. The democrats, and those of a secular or nationalist bent, had scattered themselves throughout Tajikistan and the wider region, with their leaders taking sanctuary in both Tehran and Moscow. The IRP had lived to fight another day, setting up its main camp in the northern Afghanistan town of Taloqan, with its leaders either taking sanctuary under the watchful eye of the Afghan mujahedeen or in Tehran, where they were provided with accommodation and financial support by the Islamic Republic. From this low point, the IRP sought to regroup and rearm itself, and with a number of other smaller political groupings formed a united front, the Movement for Islamic Revival in Tajikistan (MIRT), which would coordinate the Islamist’s military and political initiatives. This newly-formed group was led by former IRP ruling council member Sayed Abdullo Nuri, while Tajikistan’s former official clerical chief (qo’zikalon),

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117 For example see Keyhan’s stinging commentary which declared that the Iranian government’s “wariness” to describe the war in Tajikistan as “Islamic” in nature, and the foreign ministry’s unwillingness “to voice the true and appropriate position that befits Iran’s position as Islam’s leader” was a miscalculation that would hurt Iran’s reputation in the wider Islamic world. “‘International Silence’ on Tajikistan Assailed,” Tehran Keyhan. November 15, 1992. [FBIS-NES-92-227, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia, November 24, 1992] 62-63.

118 Parker, Persian Dreams, 84.

119 Shodman Yusuf of the DPT, and Akbar Turajonzoda were just two of a number of opposition leaders provided housing and support in Iran during the conflict.

120 Olimova and Olimov, "The Islamic Renaissance Party," 27.
Akbar Turajonzoda, was named first deputy of the organisation.\textsuperscript{121} Iran did support the MIRT, but this support was not enough to please MIRT leaders who openly criticised Iran’s lack of assistance, and instead received the majority of their backing—particularly in the form of weaponry—from their Afghan Tajik brethren and the Afghan mujahedeen. According to Akiner, this support from different factions within chaotic Afghanistan was substantial, and the MIRT’s links with Afghan warlord, Ahmad Shah Massoud, were particularly strong.\textsuperscript{122} More importantly, low-level northern Afghan field commanders often acted independently of their Afghan superiors in assisting the MIRT who, funded by the trade in narcotics, were able to continue to take the fight up to the Russians and the Tajik government.\textsuperscript{123}

By the middle of 1993 the MIRT had effectively regrouped, and launched numerous raids across the Afghan border into Tajikistan, frustrating Moscow and thus forcing it to send more troops into Tajikistan, leading to public fears that Russia could potentially find itself mired in “another Afghanistan”. According to Nourzhanov, by July 1993 the opposition had an estimated 8,000 combatants in northern Afghanistan, and 2,000 in Tajikistan proper, and those based in Afghanistan had confronted the 16,000 Russian border guards in more than 400 cross-border combat engagements in 1993 alone.\textsuperscript{124} These frustratingly frequent cross-border raids by the opposition, who adopted guerrilla tactics not dissimilar to those used by the Afghan mujahedeen during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, put paid to the suggestion by Kremlin officials that the Tajik Civil War had effectively ended with the Popular Front’s takeover of Dushanbe, further highlighting the crucial need for a political solution to the ongoing conflict. However, the real turning point in shifting Moscow’s attitude to the circumstances on the ground in Tajikistan was the razing

\textsuperscript{121} Atkin, "Iran, Russia and Tajikistan's Civil War," 367.


\textsuperscript{123} Akiner, Tajikistan: Disintegration or Reconciliation?, 49.

of a Russian-manned border post by Tajik opposition militants, reinforced by Afghan mujahedeen in July 1993, which led to the death of 22 Russian Border Guards and three soldiers from the 201st MRD.\footnote{Parker, 	extit{Persian Dreams}, 88-89; Catherine Poujol, "Some Reflections on Russian Involvement in the Tajik Conflict, 1992-1993 (with Chronology)," in 	extit{Tajikistan: The Trials of Independence}, ed. Mohammad-Reza Djilali, Frederic Grare, and Shirin Akiner (Surrey: Curzon, 1998), 99-118.}

The razing of Border Post No. 12 provoked fury in Moscow, and a realisation that Iran and Russia needed to work together in bringing the two rival Tajik sides to the negotiating table.\footnote{Even if this event had not occurred, it was apparent that a military stalemate had taken shape between the government and the opposition. The opposition was strong enough not to be defeated by the government of Rahmon, who despite forming an army of almost 11,000 men—backed by 5,500 loyal supporters of the Interior Ministry and the presence of Russians in the south—could not dislodge the opposition. On the flip side of the coin, the opposition’s military strength was not sufficient enough to project power into the northern regions and the capital. In these circumstances, Iran again pushed Russia to embrace a political solution to the conflict. In the words of Nourzhanov, Russia had two options: Either to become directly involved in the intra-Tajik conflict and face the prospect of Afghanistan Mk II, or to foster stability by political means while maintaining a strong military presence in this strategically important part of the world.\footnote{Ibid.} With domestic pressure at home, and an unwillingness to overcommit itself, Moscow decided on the latter option, restricting its troops to border-protection operations and...}
peacekeeping, while attempting to seek a political solution to the ongoing conflict. Iran was only too happy to assist in such political endeavours, but insisted that its interests and importance within Tajikistan had to be “acknowledged” by Russia. Russia was well aware that Iran’s influence could be used to bring the opposition to heel, and was willing to acquiesce to Iran’s somewhat vain political demands. Reflecting on this period of Iranian-Russian relations, a former Iranian diplomatic official believes Russia was unwilling to accept that Iran was a “player” in Tajikistan, and unfortunately carried an old “Soviet mindset”, which delayed peace talks from eventually taking place. Furthermore, according to the official, Russia did not want to give Iran “a slice of the cake” and it “should have understood from the beginning” that Iran was an integral and indefatigable component of Tajikistan’s political landscape and culture, and by the middle of 1993 this “fact” had finally been acknowledged by the Kremlin, thus paving the way for the first of what would be a long series of negotiations between the Tajik government and the opposition to take place.

4.5 Brokering a Peace in Tajikistan

As 1993 drew to a close and Russia grappled with how to best cope with what seemed to be a never-ending cycle of violence on the Tajik-Afghan border, Iran continued its attempts to become a central player in any future political settlement of the Tajik conflict, while also attempting to maintain “generally normal relations with the regime in Dushanbe—again underlining Tehran’s desire and objective of convincing all other actors of its prominent role in Tajikistan”. On both fronts, Iran encountered difficulties. As Russia became increasingly convinced of the vital need for a political solution to the conflict, it assumed the lead role in designing the framework for peace negotiations between the two opposing sides in the Tajik conflict, thus undermining Iran’s attempt to

128 Mesbahi, “Iran and Tajikistan,” 129.
129 Former Iranian Diplomat. Personal communication with author.
become the “central player” in Tajikistan. Furthermore, Iran’s relationship with the Tajik government under Rahmon was cold at best, and in no respects could it be considered “normal”. While Iran continued to sponsor and fund cultural and educational initiatives, the distribution of humanitarian aid, and made a number of positive statements, and expressions of goodwill towards Tajikistan,\textsuperscript{131} in practice Iran sought to deliberately avoid close ties with the government in Dushanbe, while increasingly becoming the political patron of the opposition. A major example of this was Rafsanjani’s much-publicised visit to Central Asia in October 1993. During this trip he visited all of the Central Asian republics, except Tajikistan, a gesture which observers believed was aimed at undermining the legitimacy of Rahmon’s government, while supporting the opposition.\textsuperscript{132} For its part, under Rahmon the Tajik government viewed Iran suspiciously and turned ever more closely towards Uzbekistan and Russia for its political support and guidance.

Following the massacre of Border Post No. 12, Russian and Iranian officials engaged in frequent talks with their respective clients in the opposition and in the Tajik government, consistently pointing out that the civil war could not be solved through military means, and that a political solution would be required sooner, rather than later.\textsuperscript{133} This was a difficult process for both the Russians and the Iranians alike, with both sides having to deal with increasingly truculent and unwilling actors within both the opposition and the Tajik government. Rahmon’s government in particular was unwilling to negotiate with

\textsuperscript{131} For example, see "Envoy to Tajikistan Interviewed on Relations," Tehran Ettela’at September 8, 1993 [FBIS-NES-93-182, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia, September 22, 1993] 43-44.

\textsuperscript{132} See "Iran and Tajikistan," 132. Interestingly, despite Uzbekistan President Karimov’s often loud criticism of Iran, Rafsanjani visited Tashkent, talking up Iran’s apparently “good relations” with that country—another example of Iranian pragmatism in the Central Asian region. See "Rafsanjani, Karimov Hold First Round of Talks," Tehran IRNA October 18, 1993 [FBIS-SOV-93-200, Daily Report. Central Eurasia, October 19, 1993] 75.

\textsuperscript{133} Lynch, "The Tajik Civil War and Peace Process," 49-72.
the opposition, causing considerable frustration in Moscow. For instance, in May 1993 Rahmon made his views towards the opposition very clear stating:

> It is a fact that in its [the opposition’s] composition there are professional murderers, cut-throats, aggressors, and thieves who plunder their own people and can hardly be called democrats…It is not worth sitting down at the negotiating table with the opposition leaders because they should have been answerable to the law of the people for what they had done against their people. 134

Although these discussions were important, the key turning point of 1993 was the visit of the director of the Russian Intelligence Services, Yevgenii Primakov, to Kabul and Tehran in July and August 1993 as Yeltsin’s special envoy to the Tajik crisis.135 Meeting with MIRT chief Nuri in Kabul, Primakov was given a number of encouraging signs relating to the opposition’s willingness to negotiate. Although the talks with Nuri had been “extremely frank”, Primakov felt positive that Nuri wanted an end to the conflict, and would be open to negotiations with Rahmon.136 Nuri further stated that he would attempt to calm down the attacks that were taking place on the border. According to Primakov, Nuri had given a firm indication of the opposition’s eventual negotiating position, wherein “it was possible to agree on the approximate proportions of representation of the opposition and the Dushanbe leadership in the organs of power—30 percent to 70. Rahmonov supported this ratio”. 137

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136 Ibid., 116.

137 Ibid., 117. Parker also deals substantially with Primakov’s visit, see Parker, Persian Dreams, 96.
Following on from this promising meeting in Kabul, Primakov moved onto Tehran, where high-level discussions were held with President Rafsanjani, Foreign Minister Velayati, and Deputy Foreign Minister Va’ali, where he sought to enlist Iran’s further support for Russian-initiated Tajik peace negotiations. Primakov’s meetings in Tehran were overwhelmingly positive, with Primakov noting that Iran was happy to coordinate its policies with Russia as a means “to get out of isolation and take part in positive processes on the international arena”. Following on from Primakov’s meeting with the Iranian leadership in August 1993, Russian First Deputy Foreign Minister Anatoly Adamishin made a trip to Tehran in March 1994, where Iranian officials facilitated a meeting with the deputy of the MIRT, Turajonzoda, and other members of the opposition. This meeting between Adamishin and Turajonzoda would finally pave the way for the first of the UN-led peace talks between the opposition and the Tajik government in April 1994 in Moscow, with representatives of Russia, Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan acting as observers.

While officials in Tehran expressed a willingness to assist Moscow throughout the second half of 1993, and had facilitated some of Russia’s more important meetings with opposition figures, there was a feeling,—expressed directly to Primakov by Va’ali during his visit to Tehran in August of 1993—that Iran was being “elbowed out” of the attempts to bring peace to Tajikistan. Indeed it was the case that following the Border Post No.12 massacre that Russia had taken the initiative in attempting to broker peace talks in Tajikistan, and Iran, who had from early 1992 called for a peaceful solution to the Tajik political crisis, had been quickly relegated to a supporting role. This complaint that Iran

138 Persian Dreams, 96.
139 Ibid., 97.
142 Persian Dreams, 97.
was being elbowed out of the prospective peace process was one that was echoed in Iran’s press at the time,\(^{143}\) and throughout the interviews conducted by the author with Iranian officials who were involved in trying to broker a peace agreement between the opposition and the Tajik government. In many respects, these officials felt that Iran’s “crucial role” in bringing the opposition to the eventual negotiating table with the Tajik government had been consistently overlooked and under-acknowledged, and that Russia had taken most of the credit for the eventual success of the peace negotiations. While this affirms the churlish behaviour that is never too far from Iran’s often at times loud political hubris and rhetoric, the complaint is not without justification.

Russia’s role in the political horse-trading of 1993 has been widely acknowledged and outlined within the literature,\(^{144}\) however Iran’s critical role in encouraging and facilitating the eventual establishment of peace negotiations throughout this same period has largely escaped attention. Iranian officials based in Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Iran applied significant pressure upon opposition figures to negotiate and compromise with the Rahmon government,\(^{145}\) and without Iran’s support it could be argued that it would have been unlikely that Primakov could have received an audience with Nuri, a meeting he said was arranged using “foreign intelligence tactics”, or for that matter, Adamishin’s meeting with Turajonzoda in Tehran in March 1994.\(^{146}\) Iran’s links with the opposition, in particular those who had fled to Iran from Tajikistan, were, as confirmed by a former

\(^{143}\) The Iranian Foreign Ministry had not even released to the Iranian media the news that Adamishin had held talks with the opposition. Following his visit, Salam produced a commentary piece criticising not only the choice of venue for the peace talks, Moscow, but also took exception to the fact that Russia had taken the lead role in mediating a conflict that they had “created” in the first place. See “Commentary on Changing Russian Role in Tajikistan,” Tehran Salam March 8, 1994 [FBIS-NES-94-050, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia, March 15, 1994] 12.

\(^{144}\) Parker focuses considerable attention upon outlining the role Russia played in 1993, gaining interview access to a number of former Russian officials. See Parker, Persian Dreams, 83-102

\(^{145}\) See Iji, "Cooperation, Coordination and Complementarity” 189-204; Parallel to these efforts Adamishin, with the support of the neighbouring Central Asian republics, placed considerable pressure upon Rahmon to negotiate. See Adamishin, "Tajikistan: Lessons of Reconciliation”.

\(^{146}\) Parker, Persian Dreams, 93.
Iranian diplomatic official, a “positive thing” for the peace process. The official believed this was so because “Iran did not want the war to go on”, and having close ties with the opposition “gave us leverage on them and we were able to pressure, encourage, and persuade them to come together” with the Tajik government.\textsuperscript{147} Even current and former members of Rahmon’s government, who at times during the author’s interviews betrayed a negative bias towards Iran, looked favourably upon its role in bringing the opposition to the negotiating table. The former advisor to Rahmon, who painted a vivid picture of Iran’s early and in his view misguided support to the opposition, was one of many who spoke of Iran’s peace efforts in glowing terms:

I say that Iran started the war and so on, but when the peace process started, Iran played a positive role…. I was a member of state commission on negotiations with the opposition. So I participated in the peace process… [I am therefore a witness to] Iran’s positive support for the peace process. The former head of Iran, President Rafsanjani, as well as Foreign Minister Velayati, and others, they all [made contributions which led to the government of Tajikistan] having closer relations with the opposition.\textsuperscript{148}

Adding further to these comments was that of one of Tajikistan’s most prominent government officials. In an interview with the author, the official was effusive in his praise of Iran:

Several rounds of negotiations and meetings took place in Iran. [Iran paid for the] hospitality, the expenditures…. Hosting the delegations of the government and the opposition…creating the necessary conditions costs a lot of money….It was not all about official negotiations. There were various meetings, consultations; even at the highest level…Iran played a direct part in creating the conditions for the negotiations. They were also mediators; they met with the government and the representatives of the opposition at the level of Deputy Foreign Minister, Mr Va’ezi, and at the level of Foreign Minister, Mr Velayati, at the level of the highest government officials of Iran…. So, this is how they took part in the process…they took part directly. The Iranians were very active….Iran participated directly and actively in the peace process. This should be acknowledged.\textsuperscript{149}

\textsuperscript{147} Former Iranian Diplomat. Personal communication with author.
\textsuperscript{148} Former Presidential Advisor. Recorded interview with author.
\textsuperscript{149} Tajik Official, Recorded interview with author, Dushanbe, June 5, 2013.
While Russia was never willing to allow Iran to play a lead role in shaping Tajikistan’s political future, Russian officials were well aware that without Iran’s support, reining in the opposition would have been considerably more difficult.

4.6 The Beginning of Peace Negotiations

After a number of fitful starts, on April 5, 1994 the first of what would be nine rounds of peace negotiations over three years took place between the opposition

150 and the Tajik government in Moscow. Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to fully analyse what were highly complex negotiations between the opposition and the Tajik government, this first round of talks in Moscow laid the groundwork for a solution to the Tajik Civil War, and grouped all contentious issues under three broad categories: the need for a ceasefire and disarmament, the return of refugees and internally displaced peoples, and the possibility of constitutional amendments and creation of a new political system with both sides sharing power. The Moscow peace talks were successful in clearly setting out both side’s concerns, and most substantially it was apparent at that early stage of the talks that both the positions of the opposition and the Rahmon government were not incompatible, in the sense that “both argued in favour of a democratic secular state with a socially-orientated market economy, friendly ties with Russia and Islamic neighbours, and an ‘open door’ policy vis-à-vis foreign investors.”

However despite these compatibilities a swift resolution to this dispute could not be found, and it would not be until the signing of the General Agreement on the Establishment of

150 In 1994, the opposition formed the UTO (United Tajik Opposition). The UTO acted as an umbrella organisation for the multiple opposition groups. This included the so-called Islamist Movement for Islamic Revival in Tajikistan (MIRT), and the “secular” Coordination Centre of the Democratic Forces of Tajikistan. See Iji, Tetsuro "Multiparty Mediation in Tajikistan: The 1997 Peace Agreement". International Negotiation 6, no. 3 (2001): 357-85.

151 See Iji, "Cooperation, Coordination and Complementarity,” 189-204 for a full and in-depth analysis.


Peace and National Accord in Tajikistan on June 27, 1997 in Moscow, that the Tajik Civil War would “officially” come to an end.

There are a number of reasons for this failure to reach a compromise, which according to Nourzhanov have their genesis within the cultural peculiarities of Tajik society, in particular the need to “maintain honour and group solidarity, and to keep one’s word only when it pertains to one’s own community, therefore any deed that was beneficial to a Tajik’s community (or harmful to the competing entity) can be morally justified”. 154 This ethos cultivated lack of trust between the two opposing sides, who with “breathtaking ease” would consistently breach internationally-brokered agreements on ceasefires and troop movements whenever a strategic gain could be made on the battlefield. Military operations were often carried out only days before a round of talks as a means to bolster each side’s respective position and as a mechanism to demand further concessions, thus delaying and compromising diplomatic processes, much to the chagrin of the UN and the international observer states. Only adding to these difficulties was the fact that often the agreements brokered by the government and the opposition were held hostage to the whims of warlords and commanders on the ground. A prominent example of this was the hostage-swap agreement that was reached between the two parties leading up to the Islamabad talks of November 1994. The International Red Cross, along with an Iranian official, were denied access to Tajik government prisoners held in Taloqan by a commander within the IRP. The IRP commander had claimed that the MIRT’s leaders, Nuri and Turajonzoda, had no authority to be making prisoner-swap agreements, and that he was in fact in charge. Following more than nine hours of negotiations, the prisoners were eventually released. The commander’s actions placed the peace talks in jeopardy, with Rahmon’s government claiming that the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) had in fact broken an agreement and threatened to end the negotiations. Luckily for all parties involved, the commander released the prisoners, and Rahmon reciprocated by releasing opposition prisoners held in Dushanbe. This only took place due to the dedication of the

154 Ibid., 17.
International Red Cross staff, and the personal intervention of the Iranian officials in Tajikistan. 155

Apart from these “on the ground difficulties”, talks were also often bogged down by “technical issues” relating to the location of peace talks. Squabbles over the location of the talks often took place between not only the parties to the civil war, but also the observer states who sought to claim “victory” by hosting the talks in their respective capitals; Iranian officials often loudly and immaturely cried foul at the Kremlin’s attempts to hold critical rounds of talks in Russia. This created significant angst for the UN, who had to cope with prolonged delays in scheduling peace discussions and mediating between the interested stakeholders, engaging in frequent and time-consuming “shuttle diplomacy” efforts. 156 The delays in the peace process and its inherent difficulties were a bitter pill to swallow for Iranian elites, who had invested significant political capital in the successful negotiation of peace in Tajikistan, and had in a sense underestimated how long this process would take. Out of frustration the Iranian government frequently used its official and semi-official media as a mouthpiece for its criticism of Rahmon’s government, who it felt was unwilling to negotiate in open and sincere terms, and also towards Russia, 157 who it claimed was attempting to dominate the peace negotiations and was undermining the talks by continuing to militarily support the Tajik government (criticisms that were reciprocated by Moscow towards Iran’s support for the opposition). 158 Despite these frustrations and political jealousies, Iran and Russia largely

155 Diplomatic Historian. Personal communication with author, Mashhad, Iran, May 10, 2013.


158 In response to Iranian criticisms, an unnamed Russian diplomat declared that “the position of the Iranian press is due to a certain degree of inferiority complex and an awareness of the failures of the Iranian leadership’s policies in the Islamic regions of the former USSR….Unfortunately the idea of taking the leading role in such a situation frequently (sic) gains the upper hand in Tehran, which frankly does not help
worked together,\textsuperscript{159} and Iran scored something of a diplomatic coup following the Tehran round of negotiations in June 1993, with Deputy Foreign Minister Va’ezi playing an instrumental role in the signing of the first temporary ceasefire, and a prisoner exchange between the Tajik government and the opposition.\textsuperscript{160} This agreement would be one of many confidence-building measures that were used to try and bring both sides together, and was hailed as a key factor in placing the talks back on track after the peace negotiations began to lose momentum following the breakdown of negotiations in Moscow in April 1993.

Iran also made tentative steps to smooth over its relations with the Rahmon government during this same period. Rahmon had throughout 1993 and 1994 largely consolidated his grip on power. In the November 1994 Presidential election, Rahmon had defeated his former Khojandi political partner, Premier Adbumalik Abdullojonov, gaining 60 percent of the vote to Abdulljonov’s 35 percent.\textsuperscript{161} This victory was hailed in Russia as “proof” of Rahmon’s “democratic legitimacy”, but came in the absence of the opposition, who boycotted the presidential poll due to their inability to choose a candidate and to campaign effectively.\textsuperscript{162} Rahmon’s electoral win, along with the victory of his supporters in the parliamentary election of February-March 1995, placed him in a much stronger domestic position, and throughout 1995 he swiftly reinforced his political power, along with that of his Kulobi allies throughout the country. Not only did Rahmon sideline the opposition, he also undermined his former allies the Khojandis, who had played an instrumental role in his rise to power. Iran, while taking a dim view of Rahmon’s sidelining of the opposition and his grab for power, nevertheless congratulated him on his victory, with


\textsuperscript{159} Iji, Tetsuro, "Cooperation, Coordination and Interconnectedness in Multiparty Mediation: The Case of Tajikistan, 1993-1997.” (PhD Diss. London School of Economics and Political Science, 2007): 80

\textsuperscript{160} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{161} Lynch, "The Tajik Civil War and Peace Process,” 57.

\textsuperscript{162} Hiro, \textit{Inside Central Asia}, 342.
Rafsanjani personally phoning Rahmon to offer his felicitations, despite refusing to send an Iranian envoy to Rahmon’s swearing-in ceremony.\footnote{Atkin, “Iran, Russia and Tajikistan’s Civil War,” 369.}

Following the election of Rahmon, a new chapter of relations between Iran and Tajikistan opened up, with Rahmon making his first state visit to Iran in July 1995. The symbolism of Rahmon’s visit was acknowledged by Rafsanjani, who hoped that the outcome of talks between his government and Rahmon’s delegation would “be registered as a turning point in the two countries’ relations”. Rafsanjani went on to further express his disappointment that the internal dispute in Tajikistan had precluded close cooperation between the two countries,\footnote{None of the bilateral agreements signed between Iran and Tajikistan during Nabiev’s presidency had actually been implemented. "Tajik Minister Views Visit, Ties,” Tehran Times July 17, 1995 [FBIS-NES-95-139, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia, July 20, 1995] 79.} and was hopeful that the apparent shared ties of history and culture could form the basis of future relations, a sentiment that was also shared by Rahmon in his official comments to the Iranian media.\footnote{“Discusses Cooperation with Rafsanjani,” Tehran Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran First Program Network July 16, 1995 [FBIS-NES-95-137, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia, July 18, 1995] 72-73.} At the conclusion of Rahmon’s visit to Tehran, 12 bilateral agreements were signed between the two states in the fields of agriculture, industry, and transport, among others. More importantly, however, was the pledge by Iran to provide the Tajik government with a $10 million line of credit from the Central Bank of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which would assist in easing the economic difficulties the country was facing.\footnote{Parker, Persian Dreams, 173.} At the end of his first official visit to Tehran, Rahmon also met with the leader of the Tajik opposition, Nuri, praising the active mediation of the Iranian leadership, which allowed the high-level talks between the two leaders to go ahead, despite continued low-level fighting between the two sides’ forces in Tajikistan.\footnote{“President on Meeting Tajik Opposition,” Tehran IRNA July 19, 1995 [FBIS-NES-95-139, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia, July 20, 1995] 78; “Peace Talks Resumed with Opposition in Tehran,” Tehran IRNA July 19, 1995 [FBIS-SOV-95-138, Daily Report. Central Eurasia, July 19, 1995] 91-92.}
The visit by Rahmon to Iran came during a period of regional flux and insecurity. The Tajik, Russian, and Iranian governments all held considerable fears over the stability of Afghanistan. Since 1992, ethnic Tajiks Burhanuddin Rabbani and Ahmad Shah Massoud had been the preeminent powers in post-Soviet Afghanistan, and had managed to wrest control of Kabul from centuries of largely Pashtun rule.\(^{168}\) Fighting between and among forces loyal to Rabbani and Massoud, and fellow prominent warlords—the ethnic Uzbek Abdul Rashid Dostum, and Pashtun Gulbuddin Hekmatyar—had created a highly unstable and chaotic political environment. These circumstances were not ideal for Tajikistan, Iran, or Russia, who all had a stake in a viable, stable Afghan state for their own security interests. However, with the rise of the largely Pashtun militant group, the Taliban, at the end of 1994, all three states drew closer together against what would become a common and increasingly deadly foe. The Taliban, whose roots lay in the Islamic madrassas of northern Pakistan, were backed substantially by the Pakistani government, with the tacit support of Washington. The Pakistani government hoped that the Taliban would overthrow Massoud and Rabbani from their Kabul and northern redoubts, pacify the increasingly unruly Afghanistan, and thus place the country firmly under the control of the Pashtun plurality. If this could be achieved, Pakistan could accomplish its wider geopolitical aims in the Central Asian region, and weaken both Russian and Iranian influence. The Taliban movement, for its part, while successful on the battlefield, was also extremely brutal and displayed a fervent hatred towards Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras, and those of the Shi’a Islamic sect more generally. By February 1995, the Taliban had captured 12 of Afghanistan’s 31 provinces, and on September 27, 1996, captured Kabul.\(^{169}\) As the Taliban spread their brutal influence in Afghanistan, Iran and Russia redoubled their efforts to end the conflict in Tajikistan, which had already gone on for too long. Throughout 1996 and 1997, the opposition and the Tajik government continued to carry out political and military moves that caused deep alarm in both

\(^{168}\) *Persian Dreams*, 171.

\(^{169}\) Ibid., 172.
Moscow and Tehran. Finally, after much foot-dragging, Nuri and Rahmon met in the Kremlin on June 27 1997 in the presence of Yeltsin, Primakov, Velayati, and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General Gerd Dietrich Merrem, to sign the agreement which would bring peace to Tajikistan.\(^{170}\)

As Nuri and Rahmon finally put pen to paper and ended a conflict that had taken an estimated 23,500 lives,\(^{171}\) Iran was still recovering from the post-election hangover that brought reformist candidate Mohammad Khatami to power in a landslide victory over conservative candidate Nateq Nuri only a few weeks earlier. Just prior to handing over the reins of the Iranian presidency, Rafsanjani made what would be his only and final visit to Tajikistan as president of the Islamic Republic on May 9, 1997. Although Rafsanjani’s visit was overshadowed by recent turmoil in Afghanistan, where President Rabbani had been unseated from power following the Taliban’s capture of Kabul the previous year, it was clear that the Iranian president was pleased that very soon a peaceful outcome would be reached between the Tajik government and the opposition. Rather than having to lecture his Tajik colleagues about the importance of peace and negotiation, Rafsanjani talked up the potential for Iran to become a prominent economic partner to Tajikistan. Rafsanjani made a number of economic pledges during the three-day visit to Tajikistan, committing to Iran’s future investment in the Sangtuda hydroelectric project—construction of which remained incomplete following the collapse of the Soviet Union—and offered Tajikistan $28 million to upgrade the dilapidated highway linking Kulob to the Darvos district in the GBAO, as well as the development of oil and gas fields in the republic. For his part Rahmon, while making it very clear in a speech that Tajikistan would not follow any “foreign model” of government—in other words Iran’s Islamic


form of government—said Tajikistan would ensure that it would not allow its territory to become a springboard for those who would seek to “inflict damage on Iran”.\(^{172}\)

Although Rafsanjani had overseen what was Iran’s darkest period of relations with Tajikistan, he successfully navigated Iran through what was a treacherous minefield of seething local hatreds and regional jealousies that had the potential to ensnare Iran into another unwanted military conflagration. Although question marks remain over Iran’s conduct in the violent events that led to the civil war in Tajikistan, and the Tajik government remained highly suspicious of Iran,\(^{173}\) it is clear that under Rafsanjani’s leadership Iran played a crucial role in bringing peace to Tajikistan. Rafsanjani and his government had done all it could to ensure that Iran was a central actor in the developments taking place throughout the Tajik Civil War, and had proven that it was a “player”, and its interests had to be respected in regional developments moving forward. Furthermore Rafsanjani, particularly in his final two years in office, had placed Iran’s new government under Khatami on firm footing to benefit from the political, economic, and cultural potential of a peaceful Tajikistan.

### 4.7 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined Iran’s relations with Tajikistan from independence to the close of the civil war period under the presidency of Ali Akbar Rafsanjani. Throughout this period of relations it is apparent that Iran consistently acted in a manner which was pragmatic, and placed its state interests and regional position above all other concerns. Iran’s early support and so-called “charity” towards the opposition during its period of

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\(^{172}\) “Tajik, Iranian and Afghan Leaders Call for Afghan Settlement,” *ITAR-TASS news agency (World Service)* May 13, 1997 [Former USSR; Central Asia; Tajikistan; SU/D2917/G].

political ascendancy, the attempt to play a “central role” in the inter-Tajik peace talks, its efforts to maintain a correct relationship with its giant neighbour Russia, and finally its support and effort to broker strong ties with the Rahmon-led government, are all examples of a state that, while often acting in a surreptitious and at times reactive manner, was also pragmatic and extremely cautious. Despite the constant refrain of those who believe that Iran during this early period of relations with Tajikistan was trying to spread “Islamic revolution” into the region, the reality is not so exciting. If anything, Islamic revolution and the interests of the so-called Tajik “Islamists” were never paramount in Iran’s political calculations. What was paramount, however, was the need to expand Iran’s political influence, and defend its geopolitical position. In most respects Iran was successful at doing this, and under the steady, albeit reserved, hand of Rafsanjani Iran came out of the brutal early period of Tajik independence in a relatively strong position. However, in many respects the close ties that were expected to develop between the two states on the eve of Tajik independence were not to be, and substantive Iranian-Tajik ties remained a pipe dream.
Chapter Five: Iran and Tajikistan 1997-2005 – Regional Competition and Instability

As Tajikistan entered the post-civil war period and embarked on its first tentative steps towards political and economic redevelopment in the summer of 1997, Iran itself was also experiencing its own watershed historical moment. The landslide victory of so-called moderate reformist candidate Mohammad Khatami in Iran’s 1997 presidential election raised hope of a major shift in Iran’s domestic and foreign agendas. International news media outlets and political observers were instantly enamoured of Iran’s mild-mannered “Ayatollah Gorbachev”, who would invoke an Iranian version of “perestroika” and “glasnost” which would reshape an increasingly isolated Iran.  

Khatami himself fed these hopes by declaring that the centrepiece of his foreign policy would be an effort to seek détente with the United States and the West, based upon a number of normative themes, the most prominent of which was an effort to engage in an apparent “Dialogue of Civilisations”. Unfortunately, while Khatami pursued his lofty internationalist agendas, Tajikistan, with its weakened economy and teetering post-civil war political and security situation, rarely rated a mention within his broader foreign policy approach. Instead more pressing regional events took precedence, such as the continued rise of the Taliban in neighbouring Afghanistan, and Iran’s international efforts to improve its relations with Europe, the neighbouring Middle East, and the United States.

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2 “Dialogue of Civilisations” was Khatami’s direct response to the so-called “Clash of Civilisations” thesis that had been popularised in the work of Samuel P. Huntington. According to Huntington, the faultlines of future conflict would be based upon civilisational and cultural differences rather than ideological ones. See Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?," Foreign Affairs 72, no. 3 (1993): 22-49. Khatami asserted that diversity and plurality among civilisations was a matter that could be overcome through dialogue and cooperation among scholars, thinkers, and politicians of the international community. With this idea, Khatami sought to replace the centrality of conflict in Iran’s foreign policy discourse to one of cooperation to reform what he believed to be the inequities of the international system. For further discussion see Pahlavi and Hojati, "Iran and Central Asia," 221; Hunter, Iran’s Foreign Policy, 77; Nazir Hussain, "Dialogue among Civilizations in Asia and the World," The Iranian Journal of International Affairs XIV, no. 1 & 2 (2002): 73-85; Sariolghalem, "Roundtable," 1-38.
Iran’s lack of focus upon Tajikistan would however come to an abrupt end following the geopolitical shift brought about by the attacks of September 11, 2001 (9/11). The attacks highlighted the potential for Tajikistan to become a strategically and politically significant actor in US efforts to rid neighbouring Afghanistan of the Taliban and Al Qaeda. The United States’ newfound interest in Tajikistan and the Central Asian region did not augur well for Iran’s influence in Tajikistan moving forward, and also highlighted the low level of inter-state interactions that existed between Iran and Tajikistan. The shift in focus of not only the United States but a number of other international players upon Tajikistan and the wider Central Asian region would force Iran to devote much greater attention upon Tajikistan, establish ties that went beyond simplistic notions of cultural solidarity, and rectify a series of empty political and economic promises.

This chapter will analyse the political, cultural, and economic interactions between Iran and Tajikistan throughout the eight-year period of the Khatami administration. This chapter argues that Iran’s foreign policies in Tajikistan throughout the presidency of Khatami, while continuing on the pragmatic and cautious path set during the Tajik Civil War period, underwent both a period of stagnation and transformation. It is argued that the Khatami administration, throughout its first four-year term, displayed an almost complete disregard towards developments in Tajikistan, however following the events of 9/11 Iran’s engagement with Tajikistan rapidly shifted gears. Iran went from having a considerably low base of engagement with Tajikistan, particularly in the economic sphere, to become one of Tajikistan’s major foreign investors following 9/11. Iran’s renewed interest in Tajikistan was motivated almost solely by geopolitical interests, and can be considered to be ad-hoc, reactive, and overwhelmingly defined by the US encroachment into the Central Asian region, the reinvigoration of Russian influence in Tajikistan, developments occurring in post-9/11 Afghanistan, and more importantly by Tajikistan’s efforts to diversify its international political and economic partners.

5.1 Post-Civil War Tajikistan and Iran – New Hopes and Expectations

While Iranian elites basked in the glow of their “success” in bringing about peace between the Tajik government and opposition, it was clear that much more needed to be done to ensure Tajikistan’s long-term stability and viability in the post-civil war era. The civil war wreaked havoc upon Tajikistan’s society and economy, with the country sliding into
an economic abyss so deep that by the turn of the twentieth century it had become one of the poorest countries in the world. For instance, in 1997 manufacturing and agricultural output was only 27 percent and 50 percent respectively of pre-independence 1990 levels, and most of Tajikistan’s physical infrastructure was either obsolete, poorly maintained, or destroyed. One of the only significant industrial enterprises to escape destruction during the civil war was Tajikistan’s aluminium smelter, which alone contributed to a staggering 31 percent of Tajikistan’s economic output in 1996, increasing from 8 percent in 1990.\textsuperscript{3} Other prominent industries, such as coal mining and cement production, were almost wiped out during the civil war period, and to the present day have not fully recovered.\textsuperscript{4} Filling a major portion of the void left by the destruction of Tajikistan’s main industries, the black market economy expanded substantially in Tajikistan throughout the civil war period and directly following its official cessation.\textsuperscript{5} The many thousands of Tajiks who had fled to Afghanistan following the outbreak of violence in 1992 had increased Tajikistan’s exposure to Afghanistan’s major export—the trade in opium and heroin. Organised criminal gangs sprang up in Tajikistan, and with the complicity of Tajik government officials, the trade in narcotics took over as a major source of revenue, leading a number of observers to declare that Tajikistan was in fact a “narco-state”\textsuperscript{6}. The development and consolidation of the narcotics trade in Tajikistan had the effect of not only lining the pockets of corrupt government officials, but also empowering regional

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\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., 65.


\textsuperscript{6} In the words of Letizia Paoli et al., “one can safely say that Tajikistan has become, in less than 10 years, a veritable “narco-state.” Drug trafficking heavily pollutes the country’s economic and political systems and seriously threatens its recovery from the ruinous civil war of the 1990s. What is even worse, a preponderant part of its drug trade is conducted not by common criminals or terrorist groups, but by gangs headed or protected by high-ranking government officials. In no other country of the world, except perhaps contemporary Afghanistan, can such a superimposition between drug traffickers and government officials be found.” Letizia Paoli et al., “Tajikistan: The Rise of a Narco-State,” \textit{Journal of Drug Issues} 37, no. 4 (2007): 971.

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warlords and their supporters, who on a number of occasions challenged the authority of the Tajik central government.7

Unfortunately, Tajikistan’s post-civil war ills escaped the attention of the international community.8 Donor conferences held throughout 1997 and 1998 did not provide Tajikistan with the economic and humanitarian assistance it required.9 Tajikistan was “too distant and insecure to merit support” and its government and people—over 65 percent of whom lived below the poverty line,—were left to fend for themselves and deal with the difficult task of post-war economic, social, and political reconstruction alone.10 In these circumstances Tajikistan’s political leaders turned to the country’s main political partners during the civil war period, Russia and Iran, for support and assistance in the country’s post-war reconstruction. As the central supporter of the Tajik government, much of the burden of ensuring Tajikistan’s security and stability fell upon the Kremlin, which remained committed to protecting Tajikistan’s southern border with Afghanistan, and also sought to insulate Tajikistan’s diabolically weak economy from complete disaster by allowing an increasing number of Tajik labour migrants to work in Russia’s comparatively much stronger economy. Tajikistan’s fragile domestic situation, and


8 Tajikistan’s fragility was compounded by the complications that would arise from the reintegration of opposition groups and their supporters back into Tajik society. Up until 2001, sporadic fighting and political assassinations took place regularly in Tajikistan, and political disagreement between the Tajik central government and the leaders of the opposition continued even after the signing of the peace agreement in June 1997. See Lena Jonson, Tajikistan in the New Central Asia: Geopolitics, Great Power Rivalry and Radical Islam (London: IB Tauris, 2006), 46.

9 At a two-day United Nations Donor Conference for Peace and Reconciliation in Tajikistan held in Vienna, Austria on November 25, 1997, only $56.5 million was pledged by international donors, $10 million short of what was initially expected. However, very few of the pledges were actually carried through. See "UN Donor Conference on Tajikistan Raise $56.5 Million for Organization's First-Ever Peace-Building Operation," United Nations Department of Public Information, http://reliefweb.int/report/tajikistan/un-donor-conference-tajikistan-raise-565-million-organizations-first-ever-peace, accessed June 1, 2014; "Tajik Leader, in Vienna, Appeals for Aid," New York Times, November 25, 1997; "Donors Pledge over $3m for Rehabilitation Programme in Central Tajikistan," BBC Monitoring Central Asia, July 23, 1999.

Russia’s strong military presence of 11,500 border guards and 6,500 soldiers, therefore made it only natural that Dushanbe would focus much of its outward attention towards Moscow.¹¹

Throughout 1997, however, Tajik elites also sought to take a number of tentative steps to increase their country’s relations with Iran, particularly in the fields of economics, industry, and trade. President Rahmon and Prime Minister Yahyo Azimov on separate occasions throughout 1997 highlighted the potential for Iran to expand its role in Tajikistan through private investment and state-to-state economic cooperation. While Iran had played a major political role in Tajikistan during the civil war, and was particularly influential with the Tajik opposition, commercial and economic ties between the two states remained limited. In 1997 Iran-Tajik trade ties stood at a lowly $32 million, with Iran’s share of Tajikistan’s total trade turnover constituting only seven percent.¹² Furthermore, beyond the fields of economics and trade, other measures of Iran’s interactions with Tajikistan also remained minimal. Very few Tajiks undertook study in Iranian higher education institutions,¹³ the early Iranian encouragement for Tajiks to take up the Arabic script in place of Cyrillic had fallen by the wayside,¹⁴ air-routes between

¹¹ Jonson, Tajikistan in the New Central Asia, 50.


¹³ In conversations with Iranian academicians, there was a sense that Tajiks since independence had no interest in studying in Iran, and that their numbers were very few. This was due in no small part to the religious nature of Iranian society, which made studying in the country far less attractive than Turkish and Russian alternatives. Furthermore, the Tajik government had and continues to be worried about the impact of Iranian education, which is heavily influenced by Shi’ite religious aspects. On the other hand Iranian students and academics also did not want to go to Tajikistan, despite the signing of numerous reciprocal agreements, preferring instead to go to the West or to the Arab Persian Gulf states where the “quality of life” was seen to be vastly superior.

¹⁴ The Tajik government had shelved earlier initiatives to instigate language reforms, and continued to teach in the Cyrillic alphabet and base the educational system upon that of the Soviet era. Apart from the Iranian Cultural Centre in Dushanbe, there were very few opportunities for Tajiks to learn the Arabic alphabet.
the two countries were patchy and irregular, and many of the memoranda of understanding signed between the two states remained unfulfilled.

The low level of ties between the two states was of course not surprising. Throughout the civil war period it was almost impossible for Iran to deal with Tajikistan in what could be considered a “normal political setting” and in light of the problematic circumstances within Tajik domestic society, the level of Iran’s trade and economic ties and societal engagement was, if anything, commendable. However, with an economy thirsty for investment and a political elite hankering for support it seemed indisputable that Iran would play a defining role in shaping Tajikistan’s political future. Added to this was the fact that Iran’s own domestic and international situation markedly improved under the presidency of Khatami. For example, Iran’s GDP had increased from $100 billion in 1997 to $150 billion in 2001, and the per capita income of Iranians had also expanded thanks to rising oil prices, and the expansion of public investment in to the Iranian economy. Furthermore, Iran’s international position had stabilised dramatically, providing it further room to manoeuvre and avoid the attempts by the United States to isolate it from the wider region. For example, a number of European states had endeavoured to establish close economic and political ties with Iran and had disregarded American sanctions to invest in Iran’s expanding economy, while Iran’s Persian Gulf neighbours had also sought to reconcile with Iran after many years of hostility. Although Iran continued to face significant international and domestic challenges, on the surface there seemed to be very little reason why Iran and Tajikistan’s relationship would not develop into an “idyllically close relationship, ethno-culturally and politically”, with Iran treating Tajikistan “as Israel is by the United States”.

15 Debt issues and other problems often saw the cessation of flights between the two states. For example, see "Tajik Airline Resumes Weekly Flights to Mashhad," BBC Monitoring Central Asia, October 13, 1998.
17 Ansari, "Iranian Foreign Policy under Khatami: Reform and Reintegration," 35-58.
In numerous interviews with Tajik political experts it was noted that there was a strong belief that Iran would become Tajikistan’s foremost partner in the post-civil war period. For instance, a Tajik political scientist interviewed by the author claimed that there existed many politicians within the Tajik government who strongly favoured close post-civil war ties with Iran.19 Furthermore, a former advisor to Rahmon noted that following the civil war the Tajik government attempted to have “good economic relations [with Iran]. The government wanted Iran, the Iranian enterprises, the Iranian businessmen to participate in construction of [infrastructure], and industrial enterprises.” However in seeking such support, the Tajik government was adamant that Iran did not “target the religious sentiments of the people. Because first of all our state is secular. Therefore, any impact of religion [would] not be accepted.” 20 The advisor raised an interesting contradiction that existed in Iran’s relationship with Tajikistan throughout the post-civil war period. While Tajikistan was open and enthusiastic towards Iranian economic and political engagement, it remained nervous towards the religious aspects of Iranian politics and society. However, in discussions with Iranian political elites there was also a strong awareness and acknowledgement of these Tajik fears towards Iran’s “Islamic character”. For instance, a prominent Iranian academician interviewed by the author was adamant that when dealing with Tajikistan, Iran’s elites completely and purposefully precluded any mention of Islam or revolutionary-inspired discourse in an attempt to overcome the suspicions harboured by certain segments of Tajikistan’s ruling regime. Instead Iranian elites focused their attention upon purely economic and political engagement with the Tajik government, and restricted their cultural engagement to linguistic and non-religious cultural commonalities.21

Nonetheless, no matter how pragmatic or constructive Iran could be in its foreign policy agendas towards not only Tajikistan but also the wider region, it would still be “perceived and treated as revolutionary”.22 However, with a new president who sought to emphasise

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19 Tajik Political Scientist. Recorded interview with author, Dushanbe, June 4, 2013.
20 Former Presidential Advisor. Recorded interview with author.
21 Professor of Political Science. Personal communication with author.
22 Mesbahi, "Iran and Central Asia: Paradigm and Policy," 117.
normative notions such as “culture” and “civilisation”, and tolerance and mediation in international relations over the more divisive and ideological elements of Iranian politics, it was possible that these lingering suspicions towards Iran could be overcome. There were early positive signs that the Khatami administration would place a high level of emphasis on assisting Tajikistan in its post-civil war economic and political recovery. At his opening speech\(^\text{23}\) to the 52\(^{\text{nd}}\) session of the UN General Assembly in September 1997, new Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi made a key point of not only mentioning Iran’s cherished political causes—the plight of the Palestinians, and the need for a multipolar international system—but also made direct mention to events in Tajikistan:

In Tajikistan, we are witnessing promising and positive developments following the signing of the final peace agreement in Tehran and Moscow….Islamic Iran believes that the peace and security in Tajikistan need care, patience, restraint, and continuous cooperation between different groups and currents in that country…it is expected that the international community support the outcome of the peace process and its consolidation in Tajikistan through augmenting reconstruction and development assistance to this country.

Kharrazi went on further to underline the priority of Iran’s foreign policy under his stewardship would be for Iran

\[\text{T]o make every effort to strengthen trust and confidence and peace in our immediate neighbourhood, which in cases such as Tajikistan have had encouraging achievements…taking full advantage of historical affinities, cultural ties, and religious bonds and sparing no efforts for the efficient coordinated utilization of human and natural potentials and resources of the region constitute the single best long term guarantee for security and tranquillity…our message to our neighbors is one of friendship and fraternity, and we shall warmly welcome any initiative to strengthen the foundations of confidence and cooperation in this region.}\]

Taken at face value Kharrazi’s speech represented a clear signal that Iran would focus a significant amount of political attention upon Tajikistan, and would take full advantage of the prominent role it played during the civil war to expand its political and economic influence in post-civil war Tajik society. Unfortunately such hopes would be dashed by Iranian political mismanagement, and seemingly more important regional and

international developments, which would make Tajikistan a very low priority within Iran’s broader regional foreign policy.

5.2 The Taliban Crisis

While Tajikistan’s security situation continued to gradually improve following the peace accords of 1997, Iran’s attention was quickly shifting towards events taking place in neighbouring Afghanistan. Following the fall of Kabul in 1996, the Taliban continued their long march to dominance in Afghanistan, leaving a trail of destruction and bloodshed in their wake. Iran refused to recognise the Taliban, and was not only deeply alarmed by the group’s strident anti-Shi’ism and anti-Iranianism, but also by the establishment of what Milani referred to as a “Kabul–Islamabad–Riyadh axis” that had been established on its eastern borders. Both Pakistan and Saudi Arabia provided significant support to the Taliban, and shared the common economic objective of establishing a Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan gas pipeline, which would solidify their own strategic interests in the region,\(^\text{24}\) while further isolating and cutting off Iran from both Afghanistan and Central Asia.\(^\text{25}\) Even more disturbing to policy planners in Iran was the fact that these moves by Saudi Arabia and Pakistan neatly aligned with the interests of the United States to contain Iran and weaken its regional influence in Central Asia.\(^\text{26}\) Milani claims that both Saudi Arabia and Pakistan “used their considerable clout in Washington to portray the Taliban as a force that would restore order, neutralise Iran, and provide a safe gateway for US interests within Central Asia”.\(^\text{27}\)

There were a number of prominent figures in the White House who welcomed the potential for the Taliban to act as a countervailing force against Iran in the region, and


\(^{25}\) As mentioned in Chapter Two, Iran had throughout the 1990s sought to promote itself as a key transit corridor for Central Asian resources, offering a safe, cost-effective and short route to world markets.


\(^{27}\) Milani, "Iran's Policy Towards Afghanistan," 243.
were not displeased as the Taliban expanded its presence throughout Afghanistan. For instance, the United States Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs, Robin L. Raphel, believed that the Taliban had to be acknowledged as an indigenous movement, which had “demonstrated staying power”.\(^{28}\) Furthermore, in 1996, Zalmay Khalilzad, the first post-9/11 US Ambassador to Afghanistan, actively lobbied the Clinton administration to engage with the Taliban, claiming that there were “common interests between the United States and the Taliban”\(^{29}\) and “the US should actively assist the Taliban because even though it is fundamentalist, it does not practise the anti-US style fundamentalism of Iran”\(^{30}\).

The United States became increasingly amenable to forwarding such recognition to the Taliban, and even considered the possibility of dispatching diplomats to Kabul to confer with the Taliban leadership and reopen an American embassy there.\(^{31}\) However, as the Taliban’s violent actions and medieval ideology gained increased attention within the international community, the Clinton administration distanced itself from the Taliban, but did little to confront this violent movement. Unfortunately it would take the tragic bombings of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania on 7 August, 1998, for Washington to grasp the wider threat posed by the Taliban.\(^{32}\) These terrorist attacks committed by Al Qaeda, an organisation which had been sheltered by the Taliban for a number of years, focused American attention upon Afghanistan, and while these events were considered to be a seminal moment in how the United States perceived the Taliban, Washington’s response was circumspect. Outside of a volley of missile strikes launched against Al Qaeda encampments close to the city of Khost in eastern Afghanistan on the 20 August,


\(^{29}\) Khalilzad, "Afghanistan: Time to Reengage.”

\(^{30}\) Stobdan, "The Afghan Conflict and Regional Security," 724. Unsurprisingly, Khalilzad had his own self-interests at heart. Khalilzad was a member of the advisory board of hydrocarbon corporate major Unocal, who together with its Saudi partner, Delta, stood to gain billions of dollars in revenue if they could successfully construct the trans-Afghan gas pipeline. A prospect which would be much easier if the US government recognised the Taliban’s rule.

\(^{31}\) Ibid., 723.

\(^{32}\) Parker, Persian Dreams, 180.
1998, the United States was unwilling to fully retaliate against the Taliban, and was pusillanimous in providing substantial support to anti-Taliban forces.\textsuperscript{33} Instead, it was largely left up to Iran and Russia, two states who shared similar regional threat perceptions in the form of Sunni-inspired extremism and narcotics trafficking, to organise a “sphere of resistance” against the Taliban.

Since at least 1996, Iran and Russia had supplied arms and equipment to the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance forces led by warlords Abdur Rashid Dostum, Ahmad Shah Massoud, and former Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani. In supplying vital military materiel to the Northern Alliance, Iran conducted large-scale airlift operations through the Northern Alliance redoubt of Mazar-e Sharif, while the Russians relied upon supply routes through Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.\textsuperscript{34} Iran’s ability to supply arms and supplies to the Northern Alliance was severely compromised, however, following the fall of Mazar-e Sharif in August, 1998. The Taliban pushed the Northern Alliance out of the city to a narrow strip of land abutting the Tajik border\textsuperscript{35}, and lashed out against Tehran’s support of the Northern Alliance by ransacking Iran’s consulate and murdering 10 Iranian diplomats and intelligence officers, and a journalist.\textsuperscript{36} More disturbingly, the Taliban continued its penchant for violence, murdering thousands of male members of the Hazara, Tajik, and Uzbek communities who had remained in Mazar-e Sharif during the Taliban siege. Enraged by these gruesome acts, Iran amassed more than 200,000 troops on Afghanistan’s borders, and promised to punish the “savage” Taliban.\textsuperscript{37} Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khameini pointed the finger squarely at American “oil and gas companies” and the Pakistani military, who he believed were directly responsible for the rise of the

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{35} Galina Gridneva and Valeriy Zhukov, "Tajikistan: Afghan Frontline 8-10 Km Nearer to Tajikistan," \textit{ITAR-TASS}, August 26, 1998.

\textsuperscript{36} Parker, \textit{Persian Dreams}, 179.

\textsuperscript{37} Milani, "Iran's Policy Towards Afghanistan," 244-45.
Notwithstanding the venomous rhetoric that spewed forth from Tehran towards Kabul, Islamabad, and Washington, cooler heads in Iran prevailed, with President Khatami unwilling to ensnare Iran into another regional conflagration. Instead Iran stepped up its support of the Northern Alliance even further, becoming its “principle source of military assistance”.

It was through the prism of this crisis in Afghanistan that Iran’s relations with Tajikistan were largely shaped throughout the early period of Khatami’s presidency, and most intergovernmental meetings between the two countries leading up to 2001 revolved solely around events occurring in Afghanistan. Following the fall of Kabul in 1996, President Rahmon stood firmly with Russia and Iran in their attempts to contain the Taliban, offering Tajik territory to be used as a safe haven for anti-Taliban fighters, and allowed both Russia and Iran to use the airport at Kulob to ferry supplies into Afghanistan.

This cooperation was on display in 2000, when a framework agreement was signed between the three states that would see Iran purchase weaponry from Russia, which would be sent directly to Kulob, and then transferred to the Afghan border by Tajik authorities to Northern Alliance forces. Furthermore, the Tajik government also agreed to allow Iranian military flights of humanitarian aid, weaponry, and other supplies that would move directly into and out of Tajikistan. Although such agreements and cooperation placed Tajikistan directly in the firing line of the Taliban, who made a number of threats towards the regime in Dushanbe, Rahmon saw cooperation with Russia and Iran in the support of the Northern Alliance as critical to shielding Tajikistan from the instability and violence taking place within Afghanistan. In particular, Tajikistan’s government was alarmed by the fact that the Taliban were unwilling to negotiate a political solution to the violence in Afghanistan, and continued to push ever more closely to the Tajik border,

38 Ibid.
39 Ibid., 245-46.
41 Jonson, Tajikistan in the New Central Asia, 98.
42 Nurizadah, "Report on Iran-Russia Military Cooperation Agreement, Aid to Afghan Opposition."
raising the spectre of the Taliban continuing their military offensives beyond Afghanistan into Tajikistan itself.\textsuperscript{43}

While Rahmon remained vehemently opposed to the Taliban, Tajikistan’s Central Asian neighbours—Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—all wavered on earlier undertakings to oppose the Taliban. For example, Uzbekistan had earlier allowed Russia to supply Northern Alliance forces under the command of the ethnic Uzbek, Dostum, through its territory, but now had closed its borders with Afghanistan following the Taliban’s capture of Mazar-e Sharif in August 1998.\textsuperscript{44} Uzbek President Karimov even took the step of declaring that the threat of the Taliban “had been over exaggerated and invented” particularly by Russia, who he claimed had sought to remain militarily entrenched within the region, and that since the Taliban’s takeover of most of Afghanistan its borders had in fact become safer.\textsuperscript{45} Similarly, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and the Kyrgyz Republic sought to portray events in Afghanistan as a domestic problem, rather than a regional one. Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbaev, in a meeting with Pakistani military chief General Pervez Musharraf, agreed that the Taliban was a “legitimate” political force and that outside involvement in the conflict needed to end—a diplomatic swipe aimed directly at Iran and Russia.\textsuperscript{46}

The reliability of Tajikistan vis-à-vis the capriciousness of its neighbours was on full display in October, 1998, when 16 rail cars carrying 700 metric tonnes of armaments and 300 tonnes of flour intended for the Northern Alliance were confiscated in the Kyrgyz


\textsuperscript{44} Furthermore, Uzbekistan withdrew its cooperation within the CIS framework, and pushed against Russian security and military initiatives not only in the context of Afghanistan, but also in the broader Central Asian region. See Jonson, \textit{Tajikistan in the New Central Asia}, 98.


\textsuperscript{46} “Four Central Asian Countries Differ with Russia, Tajikistan and Iran over Afghan War,” \textit{Jamestown Foundation Monitor} 6, no. 210 (November 9 2000). \url{http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=22543&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=214&no_cache=1#VfGoI2UeSo}, accessed September 10, 2015.
Republic. At around the same time a third consignment of armaments was stopped in Uzbekistan, where two wagons were confiscated by Uzbek authorities. These arms shipments had originated in Iran and were intended to reach Tajikistan, where they were to be unloaded and distributed to Northern Alliance forces. According to a number of sources, Iran would not, and could not, have taken this circuitous and complicated rail route without the express permission and coordination of authorities in Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and the Kyrgyz Republic. The Kyrgyz government however denied knowledge of this shipment, causing major embarrassment to not only Iran, but also Russia. The consignment of weapons was eventually allowed to continue onwards to Tajikistan, with the Kyrgyz government blaming the stoppage as a “miscommunication” between different Kyrgyz government departments. Many observers dismissed this explanation. Many believe that the Kyrgyz were “leaned upon” by American authorities, who were bent on publicly embarrassing Iran and exposing its involvement in the illegal shipment of weaponry in not only Central Asia, but also the Middle East. Such a theory does not seem too far-fetched. At the time the Kyrgyz Republic was in the middle of a financial crisis and was desperately seeking further US aid and World Bank grants, thus making it highly amenable to American pressure to undermine Iran. In what might seem an unlikely coincidence, at around the same time the Uzbek government had also “confiscated” two rail cars carrying Iranian armaments, which according to a number of accounts neither reached the Northern Alliance nor were returned to Iran. Rather, it is believed these weapons fell into the hands of separatists who sought to challenge the Tajik government later that same year. Uzbekistan, it seems was playing its own game, and was only too happy to also get in on the act of undermining and weakening Iran’s regional standing.47

Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan’s retreat on Afghanistan was deeply confronting to elites in Tehran, who believed their stances were directly linked with their ever-tightening security and political relations with the United

47 For further discussion, see Robin Bhatti et al., Afghanistan: Crisis of Impunity: The Role of Pakistan, Russia, and Iran in Fueling the Civil War (New York Human Rights Watch, 2001); Marat Kenzhetaev, “Arms Deliveries to Afghanistan in the 1990s,” Eksport Vooruzheniy 6 (2001).
States. Throughout the post-Soviet period, the United States had attempted to woo the Central Asian republics into joining Western economic and security institutions. For example, all of the Central Asian republics, with the exception of Tajikistan, joined NATO’s Partnership for Peace program (PFP) and the North American Cooperation Council (NACC).\(^4\) By waving the carrot of substantial institutional, financial, and security support, the United States was able to further curtail Iran’s regional influence and increase its isolation. Furthermore, by enmeshing themselves more closely with the United States, Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan were able to gain significant security and other political assistance from the United States and diversify their security relations. Furthermore, in the words of a former Iranian ambassador, the Central Asian republics were able to use the “threat of Iran” as a “strategic commodity”,\(^4\) and their leaders were not at all adverse to “offering themselves to the West as ramparts against Islamic fundamentalism and as a barrier to Iranian influence”.\(^5\) Uzbekistan especially sought to use Iran’s “Islamic character” to promote its own interests and to further its agenda for regional domination.\(^5\) Tashkent often played a double game, displaying rhetorical warmth towards Tehran while at the same time undermining Iran’s regional agendas, accusing it of a number of far-fetched terrorist plots, which strengthened its importance in the eyes of US policy planners.\(^5\) According to the same former Iranian ambassador, the prevarication displayed by the Central Asian republics in regards to Afghanistan and their warming relations with the United States


\(^5\) Former Iranian Ambassador. Personal communication with author.


\(^5\) One example of this was President Karimov’s nonsensical assertion that the 1999 Tashkent bombings had been committed by Lebanese Hezbollah, a claim that by extension implicated Iran. Igor Rotar and Maksim Shevchenko, "Uzbekistan Is Isolating Itself from Its Geopolitical Partners" *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, March 4, 1999.
caused anger in Tehran, and highlighted their “untrustworthiness”. The former ambassador went on to claim that while Iran kept up the allure of friendly ties with the republics of the region, behind closed doors Iranian officials felt they had been “stabbed in the back”, and this turn of events had not only undermined diplomatic ties between Iran and the Central Asian republics, but also increased the importance of cooperation with Russia and Tajikistan, particularly in the context of Afghanistan.

5.3 Muddling Through; Iran and Tajikistan in the Lead-up to 9/11

Outside of Iran and Tajikistan’s bilateral and multilateral interactions in relation to the difficult developments taking place in Afghanistan, there were a number of opportunities for both states to mutually benefit from close ties. Although Tajikistan constituted only a small market, it nonetheless offered Iran an unrivalled opportunity to expand its economic influence. In particular, Iran had significant expertise and capacity to fulfil Tajikistan’s vital infrastructural needs, particularly in the fields of energy production, dam construction, and road building. Tajikistan also stood to benefit from Iran’s large and comparatively well-developed economy, which offered a market for Tajikistan’s raw

53 These incidents not only displayed the perfidious nature of Iran’s neighbours, but also the trickle-down effect Iran’s hostile relations with the United States had upon its interactions with the Central Asian republics. Although Khatami continually strove to improve Iran’s relations with the United States, and the Clinton administration also expressed a willingness to conduct talks with Iran, ties between these two implacable foes remained mired in distrust and hostility. This distrust was acknowledged by Khatami himself who stated: “When we say there is a wall of mistrust between Iran and the US, it is not just a simple slogan…and as long as the high wall of mistrust between Iran and America has not collapsed, we will not witness a substantive change in the relations…between the two countries.” Such rhetoric came despite considerable interaction between Iranian and US officials behind closed doors. In particular, both states were in regular consultation over the events taking place in Afghanistan, and officials from both countries met frequently in a number of diplomatic fora such as the UN-sponsored Six plus Two grouping and the Geneva Initiative. Both sides, however mismanaged a series of opportunities, particularly in the context of Afghanistan, to improve their relations, and American opposition to Iran’s involvement in not only Afghanistan but also the wider Central Asian region continued in earnest. See Shah Alam, “The Changing Paradigm of Iranian Foreign Policy under Khatami,” Strategic Analysis 24, no. 9 (2000): 1629-53. The United States maintained its economic sanctions upon Iran, which had the effect of thwarting Tehran’s economic agendas in the region, and lessened the attraction of Iranian-led multilateral economic institutions such as the ECO, which was described by the Russian press in 1998 as “more dead than alive”. See Herzig, “Regionalism, Iran and Central Asia,” 513-14.

54 Former Iranian Ambassador. Personal communication with author.
materials, particularly in the form of cotton, coal, gold, and aluminium.\footnote{In 1997, Iran’s GDP stood at over $105 billion, dwarfing Tajikistan’s tiny GDP of $921 million. See “GDP Data (USD),” The World Bank, http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?page=3, accessed 7 August, 2015.} Outside of mutually beneficial economic relations, close historical, linguistic, and cultural connections proffered an invaluable space for both states to cooperate in the fields of culture and education. Furthermore, Iran’s close relations with Tajikistan’s main international partner, Russia, and the lack of interest shown by Iran’s international rivals, namely the United States,\footnote{The United States displayed very little interest in Tajikistan, instead focusing on the energy-rich states of Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, the strategically important Uzbekistan, and the test chamber of so-called “Western democracy”, the Kyrgyz Republic. An example of US indifference towards Tajikistan can be seen during US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright’s visit to the region in April, 2000, to discuss events in Afghanistan. Although Tajikistan shared Central Asia’s longest border with Afghanistan, and was the most engaged of the Central Asian republics in combatting the Taliban, Tajikistan was noticeably absent from her itinerary. “Iranian Radio Links Tajik Military Exercises with Us-Uzbek Axis,” BBC Monitoring Central Asia, April 20, 2000.} in Tajikistan’s post-civil war recovery, provided Iran with what could be considered a free hand to significantly expand its influence in Tajikistan.

However, rather than seek to expand Iran’s influence in Tajikistan, Khatami’s administration displayed very little interest in Tajikistan’s post-civil war redevelopment. While continuing to support Tajikistan’s national reconciliation, and encouraging the Tajik government to reintegrate the opposition into wider Tajik society, Iran was unwilling to provide the investment and financial support Tajikistan needed to rebuild its shattered society. Many of the promises that Rafsanjani had made prior to Khatami’s election, such as investment in the Sangtuda hydroelectric project, the development of oil and gas fields, and road redevelopment projects, remained on the backburner. Instead, Iran dragged the proverbial chain, publicly committing to these and other infrastructure projects on an almost annual basis in meetings with Tajik elites, without actually taking the necessary steps to implement their construction. For instance, Iranian Foreign Minister Kharrazi visited Tajikistan on no less than five occasions between 1997 and September, 2001. On each one of these occasions Kharrazi made a series of grandiloquent statements about the importance of Tajikistan and the willingness of his government to fund the country’s reconstruction, all of which turned out to be fanciful at best, and plain
deceptive at worst. Adding to these contrived statements was the commitment made directly to Tajik President Rahmon by Iranian President Khatami during intergovernmental discussions in Tehran in December, 1998. During Rahmon’s visit, the two states signed 10 inter-governmental agreements over a wide area including banking, defence, taxation, foodstuff production, and dam, railway and power plant construction. Iranian news media hailed the signing of these agreements as a “qualitative and quantitative upgrading” of the two states’ bilateral relations, while President Rahmon declared his confidence that an “all-out promotion” of ties between Iran and Tajikistan had begun. Unfortunately for Rahmon his confidence was misplaced, and Iran did little to fulfil its promises to the Tajik government, with numerous deals signed between the two countries—stemming as far back as 1994—remaining unimplemented.

The Tajik government grew increasingly frustrated at Iran’s unwillingness or inability to fulfil its economic promises to the country. In his third state visit to Iran in 2000, Rahmon voiced his opinion that ties between the two states needed to move from “words to deeds” and noted that the numerous agreements signed remained unimplemented. Earlier that same year, Rahmon had used less diplomatic language, declaring that he had to call “a spade a spade” on Iran-Tajik economic relations. In an address to Tajikistan’s parliament Rahmon was particularly scathing in his comments towards Iran:

We have wanted mutually beneficial cooperation with [Iran] for eight years. I say this openly. We want cooperation with all the countries in the world and, first and foremost, with the Islamic Republic of Iran, with which we have a common

57 For examples, see “Iranian Foreign Minister Praises ‘Fruitful’ Visit to Tajikistan,” BBC Monitoring Central Asia, October 29, 2000; “Iranian Foreign Minister Holds Talks with Tajik Prime Minister,” BBC Monitoring Middle East - Political, September 14, 1999; “Iran: Foreign Minister Praises Tajikistan Ties During Talks with Senior Official,” BBC Monitoring Middle East - Political, August 30, 1999.


language, culture and other things. However, over the last eight years the volume of economic cooperation has been zero between the two countries.60

Tajik Foreign Minister Talbak Nazarov followed up on this blunt message, stating in a meeting with Iranian Foreign Minister Kharrazi that “economic cooperation between the two countries were low”, and that it was a “necessity to step up” cooperation between the two states. For his part, Kharrazi batted away the veiled criticism towards Iran, stating that he agreed that economic cooperation should be expanded, but pointing to unnamed “obstacles” that existed which would have to be removed by the Tajik government before Iranian businesses could enter the Tajik domestic market.61 Interestingly, when interviewed on his return visit to Iran, Kharrazi made no mention of these obstacles, instead praising Tajikistan’s security and stability, which “had created the necessary basis for the country’s economic development”.62

The unwillingness of Iran to invest in the redevelopment of Tajikistan’s infrastructure was particularly galling in light of Tajikistan’s external vulnerabilities vis-à-vis its much larger neighbour, Uzbekistan. Due to the political and economic exigencies of the Soviet period, exit routes for Tajikistan’s road and railway lines, and much of the country’s electricity grid, crossed Uzbek territory.63 Tajikistan’s over-reliance upon Uzbekistan was brought into sharp relief as ties began to worsen between the two states following the conclusion of the civil war. In 1999, Uzbekistan arbitrarily closed its border crossings with Tajikistan, introduced costly tariffs and onerous visa regulations, and took the aggressive step of laying mines on the border with Tajikistan—which had not been

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62 “Iranian Foreign Minister Praises 'Fruitful' Visit to Tajikistan.” In numerous informal discussions, Iranian businesspeople noted that they were unwilling to conduct business in Tajikistan, citing their experiences of having to pay bribes to Tajik officials, which often made doing business in the country extremely difficult. Personal discussions with Iranian experts and businesspeople.

delimited or demarcated—killing a number of civilians. 64 These measures substantially weakened Tajikistan’s already teetering economy, and left the country largely isolated from world markets, and even more alarmingly followed Uzbekistan’s support of an irredentist challenge in the northern region of Leninabad the previous year, when former Tajik army officer Mahmud Khudoberdiev attempted to militarily take the economically and strategically vital northern Tajik city of Khojand. Since 1997, Khudoberdiev, an ethnic Uzbek, had received asylum with his militia in Uzbekistan, and had been provided substantial military and other support by the Uzbek government. Attempting to destabilise a weakened Tajik government, Khudoberdiev crossed into Tajikistan from Uzbek territory in November, 2008, with a 1000-strong militia made up largely of Afghans and Uzbek mercenaries. Khudoberdiev’s forces held Khojand for a week before the Tajik government was able to push the militants back into Uzbekistan. Although the Tajik government eventually retook the city, the incursion of Khudoberdiev and his militants from Uzbek territory raised fears that Uzbekistan was attempting to fulfil long-held irredentist claims on the northern regions of Tajikistan. 65

Uzbekistan had taken these unilateral measures ostensibly in the name of quarantining itself from insecurity emanating from Tajikistan, which Uzbek leaders claimed had become a breeding ground for terrorism and organised crime. 66 Uzbek President Islam Karimov blamed internal issues in his own country directly upon Tajikistan, and claimed that the Tajik and Russian governments had not done enough to crack down on anti-Uzbek government terrorists hiding in Tajikistan. 67 Uzbekistan’s legitimate security fears were however undermined by its heavy-handed actions towards Tajikistan, and rather than seeking to assist in the development of a strong Tajik state, which could confront these security issues, Karimov took every opportunity to destabilise Tajikistan and impose Uzbek hegemony over its weaker neighbour. The vulnerability of Tajikistan’s

64 Ibid., 117.

65 See Shirin Akiner, Tajikistan: Disintegration or Reconciliation?, 73.

66 Ibid., 81.

economic position vis-à-vis Uzbekistan ensured that questions of infrastructure development and economic independence were strongly intertwined with questions of security. Although Tajikistan relied predominately upon Russia to ensure its political survival, Tajik political elites also turned towards Iran for support in the face of these security challenges emanating from Uzbekistan. Unfortunately for Tajikistan, Iran’s leaders, while big on rhetoric, lacked the resolve required to become a reliable political and security partner. Between 1997 and 2001, Iranian political leaders consistently condemned the “aggressive” actions taken by Uzbekistan towards Tajikistan, even going so far to compare Karimov’s actions towards Tajikistan to that of the despotic policies of former Soviet leader Joseph Stalin.68 However, apart from such condemnations, Iran took very few concrete steps to protect Tajikistan from Uzbekistan’s unilateral political and military actions, or to mediate in the ongoing dispute between the two states.

Iran and Tajikistan did sign a number of defence agreements, however these lacked substance, and Iran was careful not to link the signing of these documents with any attempt to challenge or undermine Uzbekistan. Furthermore, these agreements largely revolved around the training of Tajik forces in drill marching, and the provision of uniforms—hardly the type of cooperation that would strike fear within the corridors of Uzbek power.69 Uzbekistan’s actions towards Tajikistan did not in any way form the basis for closer Iranian-Tajik security cooperation. Instead Tehran displayed considerable caution and attempted to maintain correct diplomatic and economic ties with the Uzbek regime, while ignoring some of Karimov’s more inflammatory rhetoric and actions. Iran did, however, display serious concern towards the level of security cooperation that had developed between the United States and Uzbekistan, which had led Tashkent to become a regional “champion” of Washington’s anti-Iranian containment policies.70 Furthermore, Iran also reacted negatively to the possibility of Washington bringing Tajikistan into


70 Mesbahi, "Iran and Central Asia: Paradigm and Policy," 125.
Western security institutions. For example, the visit by US Assistant Secretary of Defence, Jeffrey Starr, to Dushanbe in late January, 2001—the first by a senior American defence official—sounded alarm bells in Tehran. During Starr’s visit, Tajik officials expressed a willingness to join NATO’s Partnership for Peace program, while the Americans highlighted the “unmistakeable” role Tajikistan played in Central Asian security, and the possibility of Tajikistan expanding its military cooperation with the United States.\(^71\) In a matter of weeks, Iran’s Defence Minister Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani had rushed to Dushanbe to reiterate the strategic importance of Tajikistan to Iran, and expressed his hope that ties between the two countries would continue to expand. Shamkhani also offered up Iran’s services as an arms provider, and expressed a willingness to exchange military intelligence with Tajik authorities. Rounding out his short visit, Shamkhani also raised the possibility of establishing an Iranian-Tajik-Russian tripartite military agreement which could strengthen stability and security in the region.\(^72\)

Shamkhani’s visit was but one of a number of occasions where Iran had sounded out the possibility of forming a strategic alliance with Russia and Tajikistan as a mechanism to check American strategic advances. However, very little came out of such initiatives despite the publicly-stated enthusiasm of officials in Moscow, Tehran, and Dushanbe. Despite the rhetoric, Iran never truly set out to establish substantive security relations with Tajikistan or, for that matter, with the wider Central Asian region. According to Herzig, Iran was more than willing to “leave Central Asian security matters to Russia and its CIS initiatives”.\(^73\) Furthermore, in the opinion of Herzig, Iran’s “international isolation and general lack of experience of cooperative security relations” could also considered to be a factor behind Iran’s inability to develop its own indigenous regional security initiatives. Iran could be forgiven for its nervousness at fully engaging with Tajikistan on


\(^73\) Herzig, "Iran and Central Asia," 187-88.
security matters. Iran’s elites feared further regional isolation, and were reticent to undermine Russia’s prominent political role in Tajikistan, and to further raise the ire of the United States. Furthermore, the prospect of acting as a guarantor of Tajikistan’s security, or engaging in political conflict with Uzbekistan—a state that had delusions of grandeur—did not hold any attraction to Iran, a state which coveted regional stability and economic prosperity above all else, especially after experiencing more than 20 years of instability and chaos upon its own borders.

Tajikistan’s post-war reconstruction did not solely revolve around material economic and security concerns—two areas in which Iran seemed unwilling to assist Tajikistan to any substantial extent. Since the conclusion of the civil war, the Tajik government had almost obsessively focused upon the need to develop a strong national narrative and sense of communal political identity that could pull the country’s disparate sub-national groups together after the violence of the civil war period. As Nourzhanov aptly notes,

[B]ecause of the civil war and the ensuing fragility of the centralized state, the ruling elite of Tajikistan had been slow to develop a comprehensive ethno-historical paradigm with elaborate mythology, didactic overlay, and a cohort of martyrs, prophets, and champions of the National Idea. However, the achievement of a semblance of stability and the beginning of the process of national reconciliation in 1997 provided an impetus and a rationale for a movement in this direction.

In attempting to carry out these agendas, and restore pride in “their” national history, the Tajik government again turned to Iran as a source of financial support for national cultural projects and as an inspiration for its nation building approach, which focused heavily upon notions of pan-Iranianism and “Aryanism”. Iran and its history therefore became a key reference point in the building and rebuilding of a post-civil war Tajik national identity.

74 Ibid.
Perhaps the most prominent example of the Tajik government’s attempts to build a strong national narrative and identity was its focus upon the Iranian Samanid dynasty as the forefathers of the Tajik state and its people. The Samanids made an ideal symbol for the secular Sunni Tajik state, due to the fact that they predated “the establishment of Shi’ism as a state religion in Iran. They [were] primarily known for their cultural patronage rather than their religious beliefs, and their civilisation spans the geographic regions encompassing all of the territories see as their cultural realm.”77 In 1997 President Rahmon declared that 1999 would mark the 1100-year anniversary of the Samanid’s rise in Central Asia. In the lead-up to the 1999 celebrations, numerous scholarly works on Tajik history and the Samanids were commissioned, the renovation and building of cultural sites instigated, and a range of mass national spectacles produced which would assist Tajiks in reflecting on the “sagacity of statehood and spiritual greatness” of Tajikistan’s forefathers.78 Rather than throw its support behind these overt attempts to define a distinctive Tajik identity, Iran did not even send one high-level government minister to the 1999 celebrations commemorating the jubilee of the Samanids, and the assistance it offered for the celebrations seemingly did not go beyond the training of the Tajik military in drill marching exercises.79 Although the Khatami administration had placed an emphasis upon notions of civilisation and culture in its wider foreign policy stance, and consistently alluded to the shared cultural bonds that existed between Iranians and Tajiks, in practice the government took very few practical steps to strengthen these so-called “bonds” of history and culture.80


79 There were also a series of minor celebrations held in Iran in the cities of Tehran, Mashhad, and Tabriz. See Sanaei, Relations between Iran and Central Asia, 264. Iran did not even send a high-level delegation to the celebrations, with Iranian Foreign Minister Kharrazi arriving days later for other business, despite being invited to the Samanid celebrations. “Iran: Foreign Minister Kharrazi in Talks with Tajik Minister,” BBC Monitoring Middle East - Political, April 11, 1999.

80 In conversation with Iranian policymakers there was a sense of discomfort towards some aspects of Tajikistan’s attempts to claim large swathes of Iranian history as ‘Tajik’, and also the emphasis the Tajik government had placed upon pre-Islamic and non-Shi’ite aspects of this same history. This discomfort is
Beyond the Samanid celebrations, a broader stagnation in cultural and inter-societal cooperation between the two countries had taken place during Khatami’s first term. For example, the training of Tajik diplomats by Iran’s foreign ministry was discontinued in 1999, and Iran refused to send its most competent foreign ministry staff to the country and the wider region, instead sending them to Western capitals, which were considered diplomatically more important to Iran. University enrolments of Tajik students in Iran remained at a minimal level, with only 16 Tajiks studying in Iran in 2001, with most Tajiks preferring to undertake their international higher education studies in Turkey and Russia. Furthermore, the focus of Iran’s cultural thrust into Tajikistan focused almost solely upon matters of “high culture”, with Iran sponsoring numerous annual academician meetings and seminars where discussions of the development of Persian language and literature programs took place. Along with Iranian financial assistance of theatre troupes, these events rarely garnered the interest of “everyday” Tajiks, who while ignoring these Iranian cultural initiatives, voraciously consumed the musical and theatrical works emanating from the United States Iranian diaspora, and also Indian Bollywood

alluded to in an interview and roundtable discussion conducted with Ali Reza Sheikh Attar, an advisor to Iran’s Foreign Minister, where he noted that the claiming of Iranian historical figures not only by Tajikistan but the other Central Asian republics had caused “concern” in some quarters within Iran. See Athary, “Roundtable,” 3.

81 Former Iranian foreign ministry official. Recorded interview with author.

82 Ali Reza Sheikh Attar confirms this, stating: “We should better understand the qualifications of our personnel, as well as the region. We seldom despatch even the expert personnel of the foreign ministry to the region... We can show the importance of the region through the appointment of personnel.” Quoted in Athary, “Roundtable,” 40. For a similar critique see Abbas Maleki, “Iran and Turan: Apropos of Iran’s Relations with Central Asia and the Caucasian Republics,” Central Asia and the Caucasus 5, no. 11 (2001): 89-97.

83 Compared to 300 in Turkey, see "Bulk of Tajik Students Abroad Study in Turkey," BBC Monitoring Central Asia, February 12, 2001.

84 This was commented upon by a prominent Iranian Central Asian expert, who noted that the “Turks can give Tajiks scholarships and build institutions and universities, and follow a secular policy which is considered safer than Iran’s policies by Tajikistan’s government. Imagine if we established a university? We should teach based on our educational system, religious values. This would be unacceptable to the Tajik government. In Turkey they don’t care about these matters, so they do better than us, and are a lot more attractive to Tajiks who are overwhelmingly secular inclined.” Central Asian Foreign Policy Expert. Recorded interview with author.
productions which were not only easily accessible, but also immensely popular.\textsuperscript{85} This was further highlighted by a researcher from an Iranian think tank, who lamented to the author that in “modern Tajikistan the younger generation have been very interested in Persian culture, especially in rap and pop music. Unfortunately, this isn’t produced by Iran, but by another Iran, the one in California.”\textsuperscript{86} Adding to these comments, another Iranian academician suggested that the lack of cultural engagement with Tajikistan was based on the fact that the Iranian government felt uncomfortable with focusing on “national” aspects of Iran’s culture over the more prominent Shi’ite Islamic aspects. Thus the idea of celebrating non-Islamic and non-Shi’ite aspects of Iranian culture in Tajikistan was neither fully pursued nor understood by Iranian elites making policy in the region at the time.

Overall, Iranian political experts were highly critical of the Khatami administration’s approach to Tajikistan, and the wider Central Asian region. For instance, Atai declared that there was an “absence of modern ideas and innovative thinking in the execution of Iran’s policies in the region”.\textsuperscript{87} Former Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Maleki was particularly scathing of Khatami’s policies, declaring that Tajikistan and the other Central Asian republics were “not a priority”\textsuperscript{88} of the Khatami administration, and that under the stewardship of Iranian Foreign Minister Kharrazi, Iran’s relations with Tajikistan had effectively been mismanaged:

Kharrazi was formerly Iran’s ambassador to the UN in New York. He did not have any interpretation of Central Asia and Caucasus. So he took many, many trips to New York, to Washington, to Boston but [rarely] went to Dushanbe…and his trips were from noon to afternoon, he did not want to stay even one night in

\textsuperscript{85} According to the academician: “India’s presence in Tajikistan and Central Asia is much more successful than Iran’s. India has a soft policy that will improve through Bollywood cinema. Bollywood is immensely popular in this region; people can even understand Hindi because they watch these movies too much. When we [Iran] send them movies and television the subject of many of them are related to religion. And they are not very attractive, when you cannot show dance, when you cannot show romantic relations, and music—people are not attracted to these sort of things.” Ibid.

\textsuperscript{86} Researcher, Recorded interview with author, Tehran, 19 April, 2013.

\textsuperscript{87} Atai, “Iran and the Newly Independent States of Central Asia,” 119.

\textsuperscript{88} Maleki, “Iran and Turan,” 95.
Dushanbe…Khatami and his cabinet felt that we had [to have good ties with] Europe and the Arab countries that we didn’t need these countries [Tajikistan and the Central Asian republics]. They believed that these countries could not add anything to Iran.  

This theme of mismanagement was further taken up by Koolaee, who in 2001 declared that Iran’s policies in Central Asia were

perhaps one of the most vivid pieces of evidence of the failure of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran…we have not been able to take sound advantage of the opportunities created…the significance of the region was not properly appreciated despite the attention we emphatically underlined in our approach towards our northern borders in recent years.

These Iranian experts did not only believe this was an issue at the decision-making level of Iran’s government, but one which had also filtered down into the bureaucratic and academic sectors, which were ill-prepared and largely unwilling to fully understand or grasp the importance of Tajikistan and Central Asia. Accordingly, bureaucrats, particularly within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, were poorly trained, and unable to fulfil Khatami’s agendas, and Iran’s tertiary sector had paid little attention to the region since the immediate collapse of the Soviet Union, with students not actively encouraged to study the region.

This all around inattentiveness towards not only Tajikistan but also the wider Central Asian region had created a general situation whereby under Khatami, Iran had “almost forgotten the region” and had lagged behind its competitors despite its geographical proximity and material capabilities. This mismanagement of Iran’s relationship with Tajikistan leading up to 9/11 constituted a missed opportunity for Tehran. Domestic and international developments during Khatami’s presidency had placed Iran in a strong position to expand its influence in Tajikistan. However, these opportunities were

89 Recorded interview with author.

90 Quoted in Athary, "Roundtable."

91 For an elaboration of these views see ibid.
conveniently ignored, and following 9/11 Iran would face the greatest challenge to its ability to influence events in the region since the rule of the Soviet Union.

5.4 9/11 and the Impact of American Regional Encroachment

The aftermath of 9/11 constituted what many scholars considered to be the further erosion of Iran’s regional security position.\(^92\) As noted in Chapter Two, although Iran welcomed the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the presence of American military forces within Central Asia caused further uncertainty among Iranian policy elites, who viewed the expansion of American influence in the region as a further move to militarily encircle the country and extend its international isolation.\(^93\) This fear was compounded by the fact that all of the Central Asian republics, in some way or another, sought to assist the United States in its so-called “War on Terror”, thus increasing their economic, political, and military relations with Iran’s major international rival.\(^94\) Unfortunately for Iran, Tajikistan also initially greeted the presence of the United States in Central Asia with open arms. Tajikistan’s President Rahmon rushed to declare that Tajikistan was “in solidarity with the United States people, we at the same time express [our readiness] to cooperate with the international community, including the US government, in the struggle against terrorism and international extremism”.\(^95\) This enthusiasm was to be expected when considered in light of the potential benefits substantial American economic aid and security assistance could bring to a country that had, up to that point, remained politically peripheral within international affairs. By the close of 2001, Tajikistan had provided airfields for United States and NATO operations in Afghanistan, overflight rights for American military aircraft, and even sounded out the possibility of the permanent stationing of US troops in the country.\(^96\) As a reward for Tajikistan’s loyalty in the “War


\(^94\) Afrasiabi and Maleki, “Iran's Foreign Policy after September 11,” 260.


\(^96\) Jonson, Tajikistan in the New Central Asia, 58.
on Terror”, the country received substantial economic aid and security assistance. For example, the United States increased its aid budget exponentially from $72 million in 2001 to $162 million in 2002. Furthermore, the new US presence in Tajikistan also paved the way for the country’s accession into NATO’s Partnership for Peace program, and the development of close collaboration between the two country’s militaries.

Although the United States consistently declared that its interests in Tajikistan revolved solely around its fight against “extremism” emanating from Afghanistan, and that its presence in the country was only temporary, it soon became clear that Washington was using its foothold not only in Tajikistan, but also the wider Central Asian region, to pursue much more expansive long-term goals. Most prominently Washington, with its NATO partners, devoted considerable attention and funds to the upgrade and modernisation of Tajikistan’s defence and internal security forces. Washington policy planners hoped that if Tajikistan’s military and security services could attain a measure of self-sufficiency, they could not only act as a bulwark against the threat of terrorism and drug trafficking emanating from Afghanistan, but also minimise the country’s security dependence upon Moscow, while at the same time increase Tajikistan’s integration within Western security structures. Such security assistance was embraced by the Tajik leadership, who were happy to receive any type of funding and assistance that could increase the country’s security capacity. The second prominent American policy in the country, namely the promotion of democracy and liberalisation of Tajikistan’s economy and society, was however viewed much more cautiously by Tajik elites. Much of the developmental aid and economic incentives that Tajikistan was touted to receive from the United States was


linked to the development of a functioning, liberal democracy.\textsuperscript{100} The United States believed that Tajikistan and its Central Asian neighbours acted as incubators for Islamic extremism due to their economic weakness and the repressiveness of their ruling systems. Therefore the “cure” for terrorism in the region would be the development of prosperous and free societies. By embarking upon an ambitious program of democracy promotion, the United States hoped to minimise the attraction of Islamism and entrench so-called “Western values” within Tajikistan and the wider region.\textsuperscript{101}

Apart from these two expansive goals, there were even larger American geostrategic calculations that fed into its engagement with Tajikistan. The United States had a long-term strategy for Tajikistan and Central Asia that went well beyond its commitments in Afghanistan. The “War on Terror” legitimated the extension and widening of an American military presence throughout the so-called “arc of instability” running along the southern Eurasian landmass.\textsuperscript{102} Establishing a patchwork of military bases throughout the Caucasus and Central Asia allowed the United States to effectively link together its already well-established presence in East Asia and West Asia, and further extend its global military footprint. Although this was legitimated in terms of responding to the “War on Terror”, the side benefits of expanding the US presence into the heart of the Eurasian landmass were easily apparent in the context of replacing Russia’s prominent historical regional role, and further isolating the key player in the so-called “Axis of Evil”, Iran. American policy planners viewed any Iranian influence in the Central Asian region as a negative and destabilising force, and quarantining the Central Asian republics from Iran would be imperative to the region’s future development and ongoing stability.\textsuperscript{103}

This newfound US influence in Tajikistan did not have the effect that was hoped for by policy planners in Washington. While Tajikistan happily accepted American aid funds, 


\textsuperscript{101} Rumer, "The United States and Central Asia," 41.

\textsuperscript{102} Akbarzadeh, “Geopolitics Versus Democracy,” 564.

the ability of the United States to influence internal developments in Tajikistan was at times minimal. Rather than American engagement in Tajikistan auguring a new democratic beginning, President Rahmon expanded his authoritarian rule, and became increasingly adept at ignoring American demands for liberalisation. As noted by Goldman, Rahmon “had neither the will nor the capability to pursue the kind of democratisation the Bush administration wanted of him as the price of being a US ‘ally’”.104 Furthermore, Tajikistan’s government, while coveting humanitarian aid, also desperately sought economic investment in the country, and assistance in the development of key infrastructure, which was largely unforthcoming from the American government. American private enterprise, while encouraged to invest in Tajikistan by the Bush administration, were hesitant to engage with a government that was unwilling to implement key political and economic reforms and to provide investment guarantees. Along with this issue was the fact that Tajikistan did not offer the economic potential of its hydrocarbon rich neighbours Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan, who received the bulk of American business attention.

Similarly, US-Tajikistan security cooperation did not develop as closely as was initially envisaged by Washington, and Tajikistan remained firmly ensconced within Russian security frameworks. Although the United States did wish to weaken Russia’s influence over Tajikistan’s security affairs, and enmesh the country deeply within Western security institutions, Tajik elites never entered into any large-scale military cooperation with the United States without the approval of Moscow. Nor did these Tajik elites ever consider dropping their close political and military partnership with Russia in exchange for an alliance with the United States, whose reliability as a long-term political partner was often brought into question by its attempts to influence Tajik domestic politics.105 Furthermore,

104 Minton F. Goldman, Rivalry in Eurasia: Russia, the United States, and the War on Terror (Santa Barbara: ABC Clio, 2009), 102.

105 Russia’s continued military presence in the country, economic support in the form of labour remittances, and its history of close political contact placed Tajikistan in a difficult position. Although Tajik elites salivated at the prospect of significant American investment and aid as a result of supporting military operations in Afghanistan, there was also an acute awareness that the United States, as an extra-regional state actor, could leave the country when it pleased. In such circumstances, abandoning its partnership with Russia in the pursuit of short-term economic and other rewards from the United States would be political.
Tajikistan did not provide a blank cheque for American military engagement in the country. Although Tajikistan had allowed an American military presence in the country, such presence was minor in comparison to the extensive US military engagement and cooperation with the Kyrgyz Republic and Uzbekistan, who both hosted large contingents of American and NATO military forces.\textsuperscript{106} The military infrastructure Tajikistan offered the United States and its NATO partners in support of operations in Tajikistan was substandard, and required large levels of capital investment to operate effectively. For example, Rahmon offered the use of facilities at the Dushanbe International Airport, Kulob, and Qurghenteppa. However, only Dushanbe “was fit for immediate use by the Americans because of its capacity to receive heavy aircraft, though it was so run down that it needed about $50 million for repair and upgrading”.\textsuperscript{107}

Although Tajikistan was placed under significant pressure by Moscow to not “go all the way” with the United States, and many of Tajikistan’s interactions with Washington were dictated and restrained by the need to not alienate Russia,\textsuperscript{108} the political shrewdness of Tajik political elites in dealing with the new strategic environment which had brought the United States into the region should also be recognised. As a small state, which up to 9/11 received very little support or attention, and one that had an uncertain political future, it

\textsuperscript{106} In Uzbekistan it was estimated that the US presence at its height reached 1,750 military personnel, with large quantities of combat aircraft based at the Karshi-Khanabad airbase supporting military operations in Afghanistan. In the Kyrgyz Republic, US and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) partner troops transited through the Manas airbase on their way to Afghanistan, while a number of different countries stationed military aircraft at the facility. Tajikistan’s military cooperation was tiny in comparison, with only 150 US troops and 500 French troops stationed at Dushanbe airport at the peak of operations in 2002. Along with this presence were a small detachment of French combat aircraft, and regular cargo and refuelling flights in support of operations in Afghanistan. Eugene Rumer, "The US Interests and Role in Central Asia after K2," \textit{Washington Quarterly} 29, no. 3 (2006): 141-54.

\textsuperscript{107} Goldman, \textit{Rivalry in Eurasia}, 97.

was apparent to Tajik political elites that the changing regional security environment offered significant benefits. Tajikistan sought to use this new American interest to exact much-needed economic rents, while lowering yet maintaining an ongoing Russian presence and interest in the country. Furthermore, the Tajik leadership recognised early on that cooperation with the United States could not only reshape what up to that point had been an imbalanced and overwhelmingly dependent relationship with Russia, but could also provide it with the leverage necessary to “implement a policy of reaching out to the world…pursuing a kind of multi-vector policy, which it had previously been unable to pursue”. Using and building upon its newfound importance to the United States and the West, Rahmon elucidated a foreign policy approach which would be based upon an “open-door policy”, whereby Tajikistan would cooperate with any state willing to cooperate with it, above all in the field of economics. Although this entailed a difficult balancing act, Tajikistan was mindful that diversifying its relations with as many international partners as possible would ensure its stability, and provide it much-needed breathing room within its international affairs.

This newfound Tajik confidence and assertiveness on the international stage, along with the presence of the United States—Iran’s major political rival—within Tajikistan and the wider region, initially acted as a lightning rod for Iranian-Tajik relations in the post 9/11 period. Prior to 9/11, Iran could afford to pay only a cursory glance at a poorer cousin, which lacked substantial strategic, economic, and political weight. However, with the United States seeking to influence the political trajectory of Tajikistan, such a stance seemed foolish. If Iran was to maintain and increase its influence in Tajikistan, a drastic reinvigoration of Iranian foreign policy would be required. In the weeks following 9/11, Iran viewed the courting of Tajikistan by the United States with intense interest, and for its part sought to maintain an open dialogue with Rahmon throughout this process.

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110 Jonson, Tajikistan in the New Central Asia, 59.

111 Ibid.
Khatami had not only spoken personally to Rahmon via telephone to express his concerns relating to Afghanistan, but also sent in short order a special envoy and Foreign Minister Kharrazi on separate visits to Tajikistan to ensure that Iran’s interests were recognised, and to drum up the possibility of further cooperation between the two states. As already highlighted in Chapter Two, Iran had hoped that by actively assisting the United States in its attempts to remove the Taliban and Al Qaeda from Afghanistan, the path would be laid for an improvement in overall bilateral relations between the two states, and to this end the Iranian government was conspicuously silent towards the prospect of US military forces being stationed in Tajikistan and the wider Central Asian region.

Iran’s quiet consent to American inroads into Tajikistan and Central Asia quickly ended following Bush’s notorious State of the Union address on 29 January 2002, where he accused Iran of being part of an “Axis of Evil”, and of promoting regional terrorism, attempting to procure weapons of mass destruction, and undermining American operations in Afghanistan. The effects of this speech were dramatic. In the words of Hunter, with “early expectations of better relations with the United States all but shattered and a hardening of the US position towards Iran, the growing US military presence in Afghanistan and Central Asia heightened Iran’s security concerns”. Drawing the curtain on his attempts to bring about political rapprochement with the United States,


113 Hunter, "Iran's Pragmatic Regional Policy," 145. Iranian President Mohammad Khatami said immediately after the September 11 attacks that his "deep sympathy goes out to the American nation, particularly those who have suffered from the attacks”. Backing this view, current Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, and at the time a key member of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council, said the attacks showed that “all governments should cooperate for a logical way to curb the spread of terrorism in the world.” Eurasianet, "Asiatische Eurasia Insight," (September 21, 2000), http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/pp092201.shtml, accessed February 7, 2015.


115 "Iran's Pragmatic Regional Policy," 146.

Khatami declared that when “a big power uses a militant, humiliating, and threatening tone to speak to us, our nation will refuse to negotiate or show any flexibility”\textsuperscript{117}. It was in this atmosphere of heightened threat perceptions and increased Iranian anger towards the United States that Khatami made his first visit to Tajikistan in April, 2002. This long overdue visit, although couched in terms of expanding economic, trade, and cultural relations between the two states, was mainly driven by Iranian security concerns and the fear that the United States was attempting to push Iran out of its own “cultural backyard”. This was evident in Khatami’s comments in the days leading up to his visit to Dushanbe, when he remarked in a state visit to neighbouring Kazakhstan that the United States “must not get entrenched on this or that territory, setting up bases under the disguise of an anti-terrorist campaign…this is sheer humiliation for our nations that have the right to resolve their problems on their own and decide for themselves what is good or bad for them”\textsuperscript{118}. However, Khatami’s fears towards the United States were not shared by Rahmon, who only a week prior to the Iranian president’s state visit made a speech where he thanked the United States for its presence in the region, which had provided Tajikistan with a “favourable situation” due to the possibility of further cooperation and much-needed Western economic investment in the country\textsuperscript{119}.

Rather than raising his discomfort about the ongoing Tajik cooperation with the United States, Khatami skirted around the issue, instead focusing almost solely upon the commonality that he believed existed between Iran and Tajikistan. Khatami also sought to temper Rahmon’s disappointment towards the low level of relations between the two states by proposing new opportunities for inter-societal, cultural, and economic cooperation. Promoting the shared ties that existed between the two states, Khatami went much further than any previous Iranian high level official, declaring:

\textsuperscript{117} "US 'Evil Axis' Charge Enrages Iran."
Tajikistan is smaller than most of the neighbouring countries from the geographical point of view. But this small part [of the world] is a very great country from the historical point of view and the [point of view of the] role that the Tajik nation had in human history….Iran and Tajikistan are historically joined to each other. The role that the two nations had, in fact, made them like two parts of one intellect, culture and civilization. This long historical past and integrity in history and their role in human civilization and culture also require now from these two nations and the two states, which represent the will of these two nations, to support each other. 120

Building upon what Khatami referred to as the “pillar of essence” that was the two state’s shared historical foundation, he affirmed Iran’s commitment to assisting Tajikistan in raising its cultural and material standards of living. In doing so, Khatami in clichéd terms proposed the ambitious revival of a new “Silk Road”, which would “connect the communication road from the East to the West in cooperation between Tajikistan and Iran….via Afghanistan to China, to free waters [of Iranian ports]”.121 Khatami’s focus on connecting Iran to Tajikistan via northern Afghanistan was a clear indication of Iranian fears towards American encirclement, and the need to ensure that its international rival did not fully cut Iran off from regional developments.122 Furthermore, it represented a small but highly symbolic shift in Iran’s foreign policy priorities, from one that had focused almost single-handedly upon economic links with Europe and the Middle East to a greater recognition of the need to open up lines of trade via Central Asia and onwards to East Asia.

The Iranian government’s plan to develop a road corridor linking Iran to Tajikistan was but one of a number of economic and infrastructural aid announcements made by Iranian officials between 2002 and 2004, and there was a keen awareness among Iranian elites that economic diplomacy in Tajikistan would anchor Iran’s interests and influence in the

120 "Tajikistan, Iran Sign Pacts, Pledge Cooperation with Afghanistan,” BBC Monitoring Central Asia, April 30, 2002.
121 Ibid.
country. Other large-scale infrastructure projects, such as the construction of the five km-long Anzob tunnel, which would link Dushanbe through the Hissar Ranges to the northern region of Khojand, were also finally slated to begin construction after almost a decade of empty Iranian promises. The Anzob tunnel’s construction had initially begun during the Soviet period, but had ground to a halt due to funding issues and the difficult geology of the site. The Khatami government had pledged to provide $31.2 million to offset the estimated $110 million cost of the project, consisting of $10 million as a grant, and $21.2 million as a loan. Constructing the tunnel was viewed by the Tajik government as a major economic and strategic priority. For a large portion of the year Tajikistan was geographically split in two due to winter snowfalls, avalanches, and the decision by the Uzbek government to unilaterally close road and rail lines connecting Tajikistan with its northern province. The Iranian government shared the Tajik government’s concerns that this ongoing situation could lead to the eventual annexation of the province of Sughd (formerly Khojand) by Uzbekistan, who had since the cessation of the civil war acted in a hostile manner towards the weaker Tajikistan. Therefore, the construction of this tunnel was not only economically important but also geopolitically important, and affirmed Iran’s support towards Tajikistan in its tense relationship with neighbouring Uzbekistan.

The most prominent infrastructure project to which Iran committed however was the construction of the Sangtuda-2 hydroelectric station. The Sangtuda hydroelectric project initially began construction during the 1980s, and was originally envisaged to consist of two hydroelectric plants, namely Sangtuda-1—which would have an energy output of

123 This was also highlighted by Jonson, who declared that “with serious difficulties in the economy it was obvious that a foreign country that would help Tajikistan improve its economy would also play a major role in the orientation of Tajikistan in the future”. See Jonson, Tajikistan in the New Central Asia, 73.

124 Sanaei, Relations between Iran and Central Asia, 191.


126 Iranian Politician. Personal communication with author.
671MW—and the smaller Sangtuda-2—with a capacity of 220MW. However, due to the financing issues and the chaos wrought by the civil war, the project remained unfinished throughout the 1990s. As a consequence, Tajikistan’s electricity production sat well below domestic consumption levels throughout the post-independence period, with large swathes of the country suffering from frequent blackouts and limited daily supplies of electricity, acting as a major drag on the country’s continued economic development. Since the conclusion of the civil war Tajikistan had been seeking partners to assist it in the completion of the Sangtuda project, and assist the country in the development of new power plants, which could exploit its massive hydroelectricity potential, to little or no avail. However, in the post 9/11 regional environment of increased strategic competition, Tajikistan had now finally found a series of potential suitors to fulfil the country’s hydroelectric ambitions.

In the summer of 2004, the Russian government sought to take a 51 percent controlling stake in the Sangtuda-1 project for the sum of $100 million. Unhappy with this level of investment in a project that was estimated to have had a total cost of $620-720 million, Rahmon attempted to play Russia and Iran off against each other. During Khatami’s second visit to Tajikistan in September, 2004, Rahmon canvassed the possibility of Iran investing in Sangtuda-1. Much to Rahmon’s surprise, Khatami accepted, and proposed an Iranian investment of $250 million in the project. Rahmon’s government had not expected Iran to offer such a large sum, and quickly signed a memorandum of understanding for Iran’s investment in the project. At a press conference at the end of Khatami’s visit, Rahmon stated that Iran would become the lead investor in the Sangtuda-

130 Jonson, Tajikistan in the New Central Asia, 77.
project, while Russia and Kazakhstan would be secondary investors, investing $100 million and $30 million respectively.\textsuperscript{132}

Embarrassed by the prospect of becoming a secondary economic player to Iran in this project, a month later Russian President Putin trumped Tehran by offering Tajikistan investment to the tune of $2 billion. These investment funds would allow for the completion of Sangtuda-1, the construction of the controversial Rogun dam project,\textsuperscript{133} and funds to modernise Tajikistan’s aluminium smelter.\textsuperscript{134} This offer was too good to refuse, and Tajikistan quickly accepted Putin’s proposal. In an effort to placate Iran and maintain its much-needed investment in the country, Tajikistan’s government offered Tehran the opportunity to invest in the much smaller power plant, Sangtuda-2, at a cost of $220 million, participation in which Iran duly accepted. Although disappointed at taking a secondary role in the project, Iranian foreign policy experts consider Iran’s involvement in the construction of Sangtuda-2, eventually inaugurated in 2011, as the crowning achievement of Khatami’s foreign policy in Tajikistan, and that it solidified Iran’s economic and political presence in the country.\textsuperscript{135} Apart from this project, Iran also pledged to construct 15 smaller scale hydroelectric projects in the country, and sought to assist Tajikistan in the training of energy workers.\textsuperscript{136} Iran hoped to import electricity from Tajikistan across Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan to domestic markets, and also saw great potential for the establishment of electricity exports to Afghanistan. The Iranian willingness to invest in large-scale infrastructure projects in Tajikistan marked a major

\textsuperscript{132} Jonson, \textit{Tajikistan in the New Central Asia}, 77.

\textsuperscript{133} The Rogun Dam had begun construction in 1976, however, the project stalled due to lack of funds. Rogun was to be the tallest dam in the world with an expected capacity of 3,600 MW. Since his accession as president, Rahmon had obsessively sought to complete the project in the belief that it would be the panacea needed to pull Tajikistan out of grinding poverty and underdevelopment. The construction of the project has been vehemently opposed by downstream Uzbekistan, which fears th construction of the dam could lead to a decline in water flows and the destruction of that country’s cotton industry. See Bahtiyor R. Eshchanov et al., “Rogun Dam—Path to Energy Independence or Security Threat?,” \textit{Sustainability} 3, no. 9 (2011): 1573-92.

\textsuperscript{134} Abdullo, "Iranian Presidents"; Jonson, \textit{Tajikistan in the New Central Asia}, 77.

\textsuperscript{135} Central Asian Foreign Policy Expert. Recorded interview with author.

\textsuperscript{136} Jonson, \textit{Tajikistan in the New Central Asia}, 90.
improvement in the two state’s economic engagement. From the close of 2001 to 2005, total trade between Iran and Tajikistan increased from a lowly $36.95 million to a respectable $104.7 million, with Iran becoming Tajikistan’s fourth-largest import partner, but only its 23rd largest export destination.137

Although there had been an increase in the level of economic and trade cooperation between Iran and Tajikistan, significant challenges remained. Iran’s notoriously weak private sector, and inability to compete with its more technologically advanced and wealthy neighbours such as Turkey and Russia, acted as a major stumbling block to the fulfilment of closer economic relations.138 However, the main factor hindering economic relations between the two states found its origins in the corrupt practices and poor governance inside Tajikistan itself, and the difficulty Iran had in conducting trade with its geographically close but hard to reach neighbour. Although the straight line distance from Iran’s second-largest city, Mashhad, to Dushanbe was only 900km, the actual road-based distance was in fact one and a half times longer, and extremely cost prohibitive due to corrupt customs practices emanating not only from within Tajikistan, but also the key transit states of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. In a wide-ranging study conducted on behalf of the World Bank by Ojala, Kitain, and Touboul, it was commented that

[I]n a perfect world, and based on average road transport costs in the region, a roadtrip to Mashhad could be made at $1,200, and to Tehran at $3,000, excluding unofficial payments. In reality, the going rate for a full truckload is $3,000 to Mashhad and $5,000 to Tehran, including unofficial payments….For a load of cotton textiles, for example, that equals 4 to 10 percent of cargo values, respectively.139

Confirming this 2002 study, Iranian officials considered corrupt border practices to be the main impediment to Iran’s ability to conduct fruitful trade relations with Tajikistan


138 Trade Expert. Recorded interview with author.

139 Lauri Ojala, Alex Kitain, and Bernard Touboul, “Tajikistan Trade Diagnostic Study: Transportation and Trade Facilitation,” (World Bank, 2004), 41.
throughout the 2000s. In an interview with an Iranian trade expert, these issues were summed up succinctly:

It is expensive, dangerous and insecure to go from Afghanistan to Tajikistan. Instead we have to go through Turkmenistan to Uzbekistan, and then Tajikistan. The first issue is that Uzbekistan charges us high taxes for transportation; and second, they inspect the packages, which often causes a lot of damage. Even sometimes they wouldn’t let our goods enter their country…Consequently [Uzbekistan] overwhelmingly influences imports and exports between us and Tajikistan.\(^{140}\)

Exasperated, and using much less reserved language, an Iranian expert on Central Asia declared that

\[C\]orruption has been the main obstacle to our trade with Tajikistan since the end of the civil war! The corruption with Uzbeks and Turkmen is difficult and has not been managed well enough. Because we do not have a direct border to Tajikistan, we have to cross these two countries. Police checkpoints, they are corrupt and get money illegally. If you do not give money, you have to go back. Iranian businesses have to pay, the things they are carrying such as food has to go there, and so they have to pay, and if they don’t the goods spoil. The Iranian government built the road through Afghanistan but as you know it is not safe unfortunately.\(^{141}\)

Only compounding the corrupt practices emanating outside Tajikistan’s borders was the inability to protect Iranian business and investment in the country. In informal discussions with the author a number of Iranian businesspeople declared their unwillingness to conduct business in Tajikistan, citing their experiences of having to pay bribes to Tajik officials, which often made doing business in the country extremely difficult.\(^{142}\) The unwillingness of Rahmon’s government to clamp down on corruption and provide a conducive investment environment alarmed Iranian officials. An Iranian trade expert interviewed by the author commented further on these issues, declaring that “investment in Tajikistan causes lots of problems, including legal issues, even in company registration rules. There is a very prolonged bureaucracy in this matter; and Tajikistan’s Human Development rank is 167 among 180 countries in the world. These are challenges which

\(^{140}\) Trade Expert. Recorded interview with author.

\(^{141}\) Central Asian Foreign Policy Expert. Recorded interview with author.

\(^{142}\) Personal discussions with Iranian experts and businesspeople.
have halted the development of our relations with Tajikistan.” These issues were acknowledged by Tajik experts themselves, with one declaring that “the Iranians don’t like us because of the corruption. They came here, they felt it, and they stopped coming. I think that they have much more better opportunities in other countries.”

5.5 Beyond Economic Diplomacy?

While Iran had managed to increase its economic presence, there still remained a long way to go before Iran could be considered a prominent political and security actor in Tajikistan. Iran’s focus upon economic diplomacy in Tajikistan had led to a much greater and well-developed level of inter-state dialogue and interaction between the two states’ political elites, which was evidenced by the many meetings and summits held between the two states following 9/11. Overall however, Tajikistan remained largely peripheral to Iran in its wider regional foreign policy stance, particularly when considered in light of Afghanistan, where Iran had committed hundreds of millions of dollars in aid and had actively attempted to undermine the US military and political presence. Furthermore, Iran continued its deference to Moscow when it came to Tajikistan, unquestionably supporting Russia’s position as the key security guarantor of Tajikistan, and was almost never willing to challenge Russia’s central political role in the country. Iran also displayed an outright reluctance to fully back Tajikistan in its ongoing disputes with Uzbekistan, despite the fact that Uzbekistan had thrown its full support behind the US “War on Terror”, and had not only placed Tajikistan in a geopolitical bind by blocking most trade routes into the country, but had also endorsed American containment policies towards Iran. Instead, Khatami refused to openly criticise Uzbekistan, and had actively

143 Trade Expert. Recorded interview with author.
144 Tajik Political Scientist. Recorded interview with author.
146 Mark A. Smith, The Russo-Iranian Relationship (Camberley: Conflict Studies Research Centre, Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, 2002), 1.
sought to develop close political and economic relations with the Karimov regime.\textsuperscript{147} While this lack of substantive Iranian political and security engagement in Tajikistan stemmed from a seemingly deferential and cautious Iranian political agenda in the country, it was also apparent that Tajikistan, in the post 9/11 period, never really looked to pursue active politico-security links with Iran in any case.

Arguably in the post-9/11 period, greased as it was with international aid funds and newfound outside political interest, Tajikistan had very little enthusiasm for developing all-out relations with one of the most politically isolated states on earth, and one which looked almost certain to be the next target on the US list of states due for “regime change”.\textsuperscript{148} Rather, Tajikistan happily sought Iranian investments in its economy, without pursuing strong political and strategic ties. As an Iranian foreign policy expert bluntly asserted to the author: “You see, when the Tajik government needs money, they say, ‘we are Iran’s brother’. Any country that helps Tajikistan is their brother! Whether that be Iran, Russia, or the United States, it doesn’t matter to them.”\textsuperscript{149}

\section*{5.6 Conclusion}

While Khatami had built the foundation of Iran’s longer-term interests in Tajikistan through the investment in large-scale infrastructure projects, his administration failed to develop close political and societal relations with Tajikistan. Prior to 9/11 Iran had significant opportunities to become one of Tajikistan’s major political, economic, and cultural partners. As a state that had very few opportunities to develop relations with outside states, Tajikistan had been desperate for greater engagement with Iran. Unfortunately, Iran was unwilling or unable to expend economic, cultural, and political capital upon Tajikistan, which was seen by the Iranian political establishment as too small.

\textsuperscript{147} “Uzbek and Iranian Presidents Give News Conference,” \textit{BBC Monitoring Central Asia}, April 27, 2002.

\textsuperscript{148} This isolation became particularly acute following the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the Bush administration’s attempts to strengthen the economic sanctions regimes against Iran over its nuclear program.

\textsuperscript{149} Central Asian Foreign Policy Expert. Recorded interview with author.
and unworthy of attention within the country’s wider foreign policy. This calculus changed dramatically following 9/11, however, with Tajikistan taking a “central” role in developments taking place in the so-called “War on Terror”. Almost overnight Tajikistan had become blessed with international partners lining up to provide much-needed aid and investment, which had the effect of making Iran a much less attractive political partner. In these changed circumstances Iran scurried to maintain its interests and influence in Tajikistan, focusing much of its attention upon becoming a key economic partner to underdeveloped Tajikistan. Despite 9/11 reinvigorating Iran’s focus and attention upon Tajikistan, Iran remained a relatively minor player in Tajikistan.
Chapter Six: Iran and Tajikistan 2005-2013 - Ahmadinejad and Foreign Policy Dysfunction

The presidential election victory of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005 heralded a sea change in the politics of Iran. Ahmadinejad’s populist, nationalist rhetoric and confrontational stance on a range of political issues indicated that a major shift was about to take place in how Iran conducted itself on the international stage. Khatami’s eight-year struggle to bring about rapprochement with the West, and his efforts to improve Iran’s international image, had largely come to naught. Ahmadinejad’s often antagonistic approach to international relations, while bringing about a much more assertive Iranian foreign policy position, also instituted a pattern of crisis that would see the imposition of further economic sanctions and increased international isolation. Rather than providing the Iranian people with a grand and prosperous future, Ahmadinejad, to the contrary, brought further economic hardship domestically, and an erosion of Iran’s strategic and political position internationally.¹

Iran’s relations with Tajikistan during this period cannot be disassociated from this pattern of crisis and international tension. Iran’s growing isolation on the international stage, and its increasingly hostile relationship with the West had an immense impact upon the trajectory of Iran’s relations with Tajikistan. Both out of necessity in the face of ever mounting sanctions and international isolation stemming from the West, and out of choice due to Ahmadinejad’s emphasis on “Looking East” to fulfil Iran’s foreign policy agendas,² Tajikistan became, on the surface at least, an increasingly important political partner to Iran. While Rafsanjani and Khatami arguably paid only a cursory glance to developments in Dushanbe, Ahmadinejad devoted significant attention to establishing relations with Tajikistan, which went well beyond the efforts of his predecessors. Tajikistan, according to Ahmadinejad, was a “strategic partner”, and in fact the two states’

² Vakil, "Iran: Balancing East against West," 51-65.
“common history and culture” made them inseparable. Backing this rhetorical flourish Ahmadinejad made a special effort to ensure that Tajikistan would play a critical part in his broader regional foreign policy approach, visiting the country, and meeting President Rahmon, on an almost annual basis. Furthermore, Ahmadinejad sought to go beyond the almost purely economic relations instituted during the Khatami period, seeking to develop strong cultural, political, and strategic ties, while fostering greater state-to-state and inter-societal interactions. These moves instigated by Ahmadinejad led to considerable discussion among regional observers and analysts, who declared that the relationship between Iran and Tajikistan could potentially develop into a so-called “Persian alliance”, which could reorder the regional political balance. However, lying just below the surface of relations between Iran and Tajikistan was a striking disjunction between rhetoric and reality.

This chapter argues that despite the public amity that existed between the two states throughout Ahmadinejad’s presidency, strong and substantive Iran-Tajik relations were not achieved, due in part to a dysfunctional Iranian foreign policy approach, which often led to the mismanagement of this inter-state relationship. This factor, along with the unwillingness of Tajik elites to go from words to deeds, and the broader impact of sanctions, international isolation, and regional rivalry, meant that Iran was largely unable to fulfil its prominent political and economic agendas in Tajikistan.

6.1 The Ahmadinejad Presidency and International Crisis

Prior to his unexpected election victory over former President Rafsanjani in 2005, Ahmadinejad had never held an elected office, and was an unknown quantity within

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3 Alexander Sodiqov, ”Iran Builds Closer Ties with Tajikistan,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst* 12, no. 11 (2010): 19-20

4 From the author’s count, Ahmadinejad made six visits to Tajikistan during his eight-year presidency.

5 Renaud Francois, ”Central Asia: Between the Breakdown of the Csto and the Emergence of Iran,” *ESISC Analysis* (2010): 1-5.

6 A version of this chapter has been published as Brenton Clark, ”Ahmadinejad, Iran, and Foreign Policy Dysfunction in Tajikistan,” *Asian Politics & Policy* 7, no. 2 (2015): 213-244.
As Iran’s first non-clerical president, Ahmadinejad’s rhetoric and presidential style was vastly different to that of his predecessors. While Khatami and Rafsanjani had sought to reform Iran’s economy and bring about some form of domestic and international stability and accommodation after the worst excesses of the early revolutionary era, Ahmadinejad on the other hand sought a return to the populist and fiery politics of Khomeini’s Iran, and with it an Iranian society galvanised by the spirit of revolutionary fervour and third world militancy.

As a university student from a lower working class family during the time of the revolution, and later as a member of Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corp and Basij militias serving in the Iran-Iraq War, Ahmadinejad was imbued with a sense of class injustice, nationalistic zeal, and religious piety, which formed a combustible political mix. Ahmadinejad consistently castigated the so-called “managerial class” of technocrats and high-ranking clerics, who he believed had lacked faith in Iran’s Islamic revolutionary culture due to their efforts to reform Iran’s political system and seek rapprochement with the West. Accordingly, Ahmadinejad had “an unshakeable belief in the apparent perfection of the Islamic Republic”, and any notion of reform, criticism, or the surrendering of Iran’s national interests were simply incomprehensible to a man who had dedicated his life to upholding its precepts. With gusto, Ahmadinejad sought to implement his own version of a “cultural revolution” in Iran, cracking down hard on...

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8 For an excellent biography of Ahmadinejad’s life and political views, see Naji, Ahmadinejad.

9 Like many other political leaders, Ahmadinejad’s military service has been over exaggerated. See ibid., 33-36.

10 Arjomand, After Khomeini, 160.

11 Ali Ansari, "Iran under Ahmadinejad: Populism and Its Malcontents," International Affairs 84, no. 4 (2008): 696. Furthermore, Ahmadinejad was by all appearances completely faithful to not only the Islamic Republic, but also to its personification in the form of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, who had throughout the presidencies of Rafsanjani and Khatami been placed under considerable pressure by those seeking reform of Iran’s Islamic republican system.
regime critics, reformists, and those who sought to question the regime’s rule. Furthermore, Ahmdinejad’s use of religo-nationalistic ideology, which often fused traditional Shi’a symbolism with the embrace of Iran’s pre-Islamic history, was viewed with suspicion in the region, and fervour among his countrymen.

Ahmadinejad’s unflinching faith in the righteousness of the Islamic Republic, and his disdain for the managerial class, had an indisputable impact on his domestic agendas, particularly in the realm of economics. Ahmadinejad railed against the economic policies of his two predecessors, Khatami and Rafsanjani, who he believed were responsible for widespread corruption, particularly in the upper strata of Iranian society, and who he considered had focused too heavily on the urban middle and higher classes while neglecting the “true” supporters of the Islamic Republic, the poor and the dispossessed.

In an attempt to alleviate the considerable economic imbalances that existed in Iranian society, Ahmadinejad attempted to redistribute Iran’s oil wealth to the lower classes and the rural underdeveloped areas of Iran. According to Habibi, “Ahmadinejad believed that people deserved to gain tangible economic benefits from the government’s oil revenues”, and undoubtedly Ahmadinejad did have the concerns for the lower classes of Iran at heart. However, while he did improve the lot of Iran’s poor, and reduced both the developmental gap and income inequality in the country, the economic instruments Ahmadinejad used in the attempt to achieve this improvement were often misguided and unwise.

12 Arjomand, After Khomeini, 159.

13 The largest economic agenda implemented by Ahmadinejad was the so-called distribution of “shares of justice” to the entire Iranian population. Setting aside 40 percent of the shares of Iranian national companies that were to be privatised for low-income households, Ahmadinejad hoped that this would reward Iran’s poor, and at the same time finally promote the privatisation of Iranian industry. Instead, Ahmadinejad oversaw the purchase of these shares by semi-state organisations, bonyads, and individuals with close ties to Iran’s military establishment, who increased their share of the Iranian economy substantially. Instead of privatisation, Ahmadinejad instead oversaw the partial denationalisation of Iran’s economy and a shifting of economic gravity away from the civilian sector of government to the military. Ibid., 160-62.

14 Habibi, “The Economic Legacy of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad,” 2.
poorly managed, with his administration overseeing a general degradation of Iran’s economic position throughout its tenure.\textsuperscript{15}

Ahmadinejad had no time for “elitist” and Western theories of economic policy, and practically ignored Iran’s five-year economic plans, which had formed the basis of Iran’s economic goals for decades. Instead, Ahmadinejad preferred to roam the countryside to great fanfare, providing cash grants, no-interest loans, and unfunded infrastructure promises to his poorer constituents.\textsuperscript{16} As aptly summed up by Ansari:

With oil prices at unprecedentedly high levels, Ahmadinejad effectively declared that the bad times were over, the good times were here and utopia was within reach. The new president indulged in spending a glut of oil money in a spree which proved intoxicating and irresistible.\textsuperscript{17}

While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to delve too deeply into Ahmadinejad’s domestic economic policies, it should be noted that the impact of his economic populism was dramatic. Ahmadinejad effectively squandered what noted Iranian economist Reza Ghasimi described as a “golden opportunity to use high revenues from oil and gas to facilitate an environment” which could have alleviated Iran’s heretofore high inflation, grinding unemployment levels, and low growth and productivity.\textsuperscript{18} Rather, Ahmadinejad facilitated the further hollowing out of Iran’s private sector by giving preferential treatment to his former IRGC and Basiji cadres, who received easy finance from Iran’s banks, and preferred status in the privatisation of Iranian state-run organisations. Furthermore, Ahmadinejad’s loose monetary policies, coupled with increased international economic sanctions, were responsible for rampant inflation and a slowing of economic growth, while untold waste was perpetuated through poorly-managed state cash subsidy programs that, rather than being targeted at the poor, were offered to the

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 1-8; Reza Ghasimi, "Economy of Iran under Fourth and Fifth Five-Year Development Plans," \textit{Money and Economy} 7, no. 1 (2012): 161-86.
\textsuperscript{16} Arjomand, \textit{After Khomeini}, 161.
\textsuperscript{17} Ansari, "Iran under Ahmadinejad: Populism and Its Malcontents," 14.
\textsuperscript{18} Ghasimi, "Economy of Iran,” 163.
entire Iranian population. 19 By the end of Ahmadinejad’s two-term tenure in 2013, Iran’s economy was in a shambles, with inflation exceeding 27 percent. 20 Furthermore, Iran’s currency, the Rial, had lost more than 80 percent of its value to the US dollar since 2011, and with a bevy of international sanctions being imposed upon Iran on an almost monthly basis, Iranian oil revenues plummeted to their lowest levels in decades. 21 Effectively, Ahmadinejad had placed Iran in an economic hole so deep that many within the country had expressed an exasperated belief that the status quo could not remain in place, and drastic measures would eventually need to be taken in order to save the Islamic Republican system. 22

Ahmadinejad’s economic populism, bombast, and his confidence in the righteousness of the Islamic Republic’s cause was initially viewed in somewhat jocular terms by Iranian political observers and Western elites, who considered Ahmadinejad to be nothing more than a populist simpleton who was not to be taken seriously. However, very shortly after his presidential inauguration, it was clear that Ahmadinejad possessed a series of hardline views, which would lead to substantial regional and international tension. 23 Ahmadinejad’s hardened views were particularly clear in the context of Iran’s nuclear program. Iran had, since the time of the Shah, sought to develop an extensive civilian nuclear program. However, despite consistent claims by both pre and post-revolutionary political leaders that this program was focused solely on the provision of “peaceful” nuclear energy, questions remained regarding Iran’s intentions. In particular, there was a fear in the West that Iran was seeking to acquire the wherewithal to develop nuclear weapons, and Iran’s apparently peaceful nuclear energy program was nothing more than

19 See Arjomand, After Khomeini, 149-71.
21 Ibid., xiii.
22 In conversations between the author and a number of Iranian scholars and regime figures between January and May 2013, the notion that “Iran could not go on like this” was raised. There was a general fear that if the sanctions were not lifted, the state itself would collapse.
a cover to fulfil much more sinister ambitions. Although issues relating to Iran’s nuclear program had dominated the Clinton administration’s policies towards Iran throughout the 1990s, it was not until the 2002, when it was publicly revealed that Iran was developing a nuclear enrichment facility at Natanz and a heavy water reactor at Arak, that the Iranian nuclear issue developed into a full-blown international crisis. Despite the fact that Iran had not violated the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) by constructing these facilities, their announcement did raise serious concern within the international community about the actual scale of Iran’s nuclear program. Arak and Natanz set off a lengthy chain of negotiations, stringent international sanctions, and referrals to the United Nations Security Council, which dominated Khatami’s last three years in office and would place a dark pall over Ahmadinejad’s presidency.

Following the failure of nuclear negotiations between Iran, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and the EU3 (Great Britain, Germany, and France), Khatami’s last executive order in July, 2005, lifted Iran’s self-imposed nine-month moratorium on its nuclear program. Therefore, from the outset of its first term, Ahmadinejad’s administration was placed at the centre of international controversy and tension. However, rather than attempting to alleviate concerns about the ending of this moratorium, Ahmadinejad implemented an intensification and expansion of Iran’s nuclear program, defying the United States and its Western partners, while at the same time painting the program as a “populist cause and national political priority”. Ahmadinejad applied tough rhetoric towards the nuclear negotiations. Speaking in the braggadocio manner that would characterise his presidency, Ahmadinejad declared that “nuclear technology is our right and no one can deprive us of it. We have come so far, and, God willing, we will need just one more push.” He added that Iran’s journey towards a nuclear future was like a “flood which cannot be stopped by a matchstick”—a reference to mounting Western

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24 Hunter, Iran's Foreign Policy, 65.
25 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
sanctions. Such rhetoric only inflamed tensions, and reports proliferated throughout the international press that the United States, and Israel—a state that Ahmadinejad claimed “must disappear from the page(s) of time” were planning on launching military strikes upon Iranian nuclear facilities. Nonetheless, Ahmadinejad remained stoic against such pressures, and did not soften his stance. In fact, at his first visit to the UN General Assembly in New York, he declared that if the threats towards Iran continued, his government would be forced to reconsider their “entire approach to the nuclear issue”. Ahmadinejad’s statement was a not-so-subtle counter-threat that Iran would pursue nuclear weapons capabilities if international pressure did not decrease.

Despite years of shuttle diplomacy, and offers and counter-offers which were placed on the table between Iran and the EU3, and later the EU3+3 (P5+1) of the United States, Russia, China, Great Britain, France, and Germany, no incentives were large enough for the Ahmadinejad administration to cave in on its “right” to nuclear enrichment. From the Iranian perspective the West’s position upon its nuclear program was fundamentally unfair, and Iran’s “peaceful” nuclear program, as stipulated by the NPT, was legally defensible. On the other side of the ledger however, were the years of apparent Iranian intransigence on the nuclear issue, which now coupled with Ahmadinejad’s fiery rhetoric, only further fed Western fears that Iran intended to develop a nuclear weapons program. Although Ahmadinejad’s rhetoric was aggressive, his position on Iran’s nuclear program was overwhelmingly consistent with that of his predecessors, who had all sought to uphold and defend the legitimacy of the nuclear program. However, in this highly charged political atmosphere, things could only end badly for the increasingly isolated Iran.

In December, 2006, despite the initial objections of China and Russia, Iran was subjected to UN Security Council Resolution 1737, which placed multilateral economic sanctions upon Iran and Iranian individuals involved in nuclear proliferation activities. This

28 Naji, Ahmadinejad, 123.
29 Ibid., 140.
30 Ibid., 126.
31 Ehteshami and Zweiri, "Iran under Ahmadinejad," 145.
resolution was followed by a further five Security Council Resolutions, which enhanced the sanctions regime against Iran and called for the suspension of its uranium enrichment program, and for its government to undertake a series of confidence-building measures as outlined by the IAEA.\(^\text{32}\) The regime of sanctions against Iran became even more taxing following the election of American President Barack Obama in 2009. Although Obama had initially taken a conciliatory tone towards Iran, tension persisted between Iran and the United States. Only six months into his first term, Obama was forced to react to violence and instability that erupted on the streets of Iran following Ahmadinejad’s contested re-election of June 2009.\(^\text{33}\) Despite claiming to have won 62 percent of the presidential vote against former Iranian Prime Minister Mir Hussein Mousavi, massive protests erupted on the streets of major Iranian cities among Mousavi’s supporters, who were of the firm belief that the election had been rigged. Much of these protests had been aimed squarely at Ahmadinejad’s mismanagement of the economy, and Iran’s growing isolation within international politics.\(^\text{34}\) In the face of this violence the Obama administration sought to apply further punitive measures upon Iran, which came quickly following the conclusion of talks between Iran and the P5+1 in Geneva in October, 2009. The Obama administration focused considerable attention upon reaching an international consensus on the Iranian nuclear issue, and was able to win the support of Russia and China in particular to pass further resolutions against Iran in the UN Security Council.\(^\text{35}\) The United States also imposed a series of measures that cut Iran off from the international banking system, making it almost impossible for Iran to sell its oil, and

\(^{32}\) Steven Hurst, "Obama and Iran," *International Politics* 49, no. 5 (2012): 547.

\(^{33}\) Ibid.


\(^{35}\) With the support of Russia and China, the UN Security Council passed UNSCR 1929 on June 9, 2010. This resolution imposed a complete arms embargo on Iran, banned it from any activities related to ballistic missiles, froze the assets of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, and called on all states to enforce the sanctions. See Hurst, "Obama and Iran," 547.
receive foreign direct investment in an increasingly financially-interlinked world. Furthermore, Obama was able to garner the backing of the EU, which had a long history of being unwilling to support the imposition of sanctions upon Iran.36

In January of 2012, the EU announced it would ban all oil imports from Iran from July of that year, a decision that would seriously undermine Iran’s economy due to the fact that at the time the EU purchased 20 percent of Iran’s crude oil exports.37 Further to this, the EU also banned investment in Iran’s petrochemical industry, disallowed European business entities from insuring Iranian maritime transport, and froze the assets of Iran’s central bank.38 These steps only compounded the above-mentioned issues that the Iranian economy was already facing, and had deleterious impact upon Iran’s petrochemical industry, whereby total Iranian oil exports in March 2013 sat at one million barrels per day (MBPD), a major decline from the roughly 2.4 MBPD that were shipped from Iran in 2011. Tellingly, Iran’s government revenue from the sale of oil dropped from $95 billion in 2011 to $67 billion in 2012.39 Despite claims by key figures within the Iranian government that it would overcome these economic hardships and resist the “unjust”


37 "Obama and Iran."

38 Cordesman, Gold, and Coughlin-Schulte, "Iran," v.

39 As noted by Cordesman, Gold, and Coughlin-Schulte: “There were still significant exemptions and waivers to these sanctions for some countries that had grown particularly dependent on Iran’s exports—namely China, India, South Korea, and Japan—but they had slowly reduced their importation levels. China, Iran’s largest export target, has reduced their imports by roughly 22% in 2012, but has increased its purchases by 74% from a year earlier, with the large number due to various pricing disputes that stopped Iranian exports to China. India, Iran’s second largest customer, has reduced their imports by roughly 15%, and by some accounts will completely stop importing Iranian crude this year. South Korea has reduced their imports by roughly 39% and will reduce Iranian imports by 20% this year; so far Seoul has reduced its imports by 30% compared to a year earlier. Japan’s imports fell 18% and the government has pledged to reduce Iranian imports by about 15%.” In 2013, China, India, the Republic of Korea, and Taiwan all qualified for waivers under the NDAA legislation for significantly reducing their purchase of Iranian crude oil. Additionally, Malaysia, Singapore, South Africa, and Sri Lanka all qualified for waivers because they no longer purchase any crude oil from Iran.” See ibid., xi, v-vi.
measures taken by the international community, it was clear that Iran’s economy was a basket case, and arguably at no point in Iran’s post-revolutionary history had the country ever been so isolated on the international stage, or its economy in such a wretched position.

6.2 Defying the West – Iran Looks East

Although the full weight of Western economic sanctions did not take effect until midway into Ahmadinejad’s second presidential term, as already noted above, from the very outset of Ahmadinejad’s presidency Iran had faced ever-growing pressure from the West. In response the Ahmadinejad administration actively sought to develop a foreign policy that would circumvent economic sanctions, and elude Western attempts to isolate Iran from the international community. Key to these efforts was Ahmadinejad’s emphasis upon “looking East” towards Russia, China, and India as a means to counter-balance Western threats to Iran’s economic and political security.40 In particular, Iran attempted to develop stronger ties with China, whose meteoric economic rise had fed a voracious appetite for energy resources to fuel its continued economic growth.41 The side effect of these attempts was that the region of Central Asia became increasingly important as a vital link between the two states. Both Iran and China proposed the development of a series of roads, rail lines, and gas and oil pipelines, which would criss-cross Central Asia, and link the two states together via a new Silk Road that would not only ensure economic prosperity, but also provide a pragmatic opportunity for the two states to bind their political futures much more closely together. Such a focus paid dividends, particularly for Iran, who received substantial foreign direct investment from Chinese companies who were unwilling to accede to the Western regime of economic sanctions.42 In 2009, China became Iran’s largest trading partner, surpassing the EU, who had sought to minimise its links with a recalcitrant Iran.43 From the Chinese perspective, Iran’s international

40 See Maleki, "Iran," 167-92; Dorraj and Entessar, "Iran’s Northern Exposure," 8.


43 Ibid.
isolation placed it in the box seat to gain a comparative advantage within Iran’s struggling, yet growing, economy, and make the most of the unfortunate opportunities sanctions had proffered.

Along with Iran’s stronger focus upon China, it also sought to use a number of regional and international organisations, which had not been subjected to United States and Western “domination”, to further enmesh itself politically and economically with the East. As highlighted in Chapter Three, Iran had attempted to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) as a fully-fledged member throughout Ahmadinejad’s administration, and this was the first time in Iran’s post-revolutionary history where it had displayed such a strong interest in joining a regional security organisation. As a staunchly non-aligned state actor, Iran up to that point had displayed apprehension towards any notion of sacrificing its sovereignty and international independence. However, in the chaotic circumstances it found itself in following its inauguration, the Ahmadinejad administration saw significant strategic benefit in joining an organisation that could counter US international hegemony, and that “would not take a neutral stand should its stability and security come under threat”.

Furthermore, the SCO’s future potential to effectively morph into an “OPEC with bombs”, thus threatening the West’s energy security, was also considerably attractive to Iranian elites. If Iran, a state that sat upon the world’s second-largest gas reserves and the fourth-largest oil reserves, could join an organisation that consisted of a number of energy-rich states from Central Asia—including Russia who controlled the world’s largest gas reserves and eighth-largest oil reserves—the SCO could effectively dictate world energy prices. The enthusiasm of Iranian leaders in countering the West, and being part of an organisation that could shift the global balance of power, was on full display during the 2007 SCO Summit in


45 Ibid.


Shanghai, when advisor to the Supreme Leader, Ali Akbar Velayati, declared that “the alliance of the SCO member states comprising half of [the] world’s population, and one quarter of the world’s landmass as well as the largest reserve in natural resources, would make the organisation the largest power in the world”. Unfortunately for Iran, such enthusiasm was not matched by the SCO’s two most prominent members, China and Russia, who grew increasingly concerned at the international tension surrounding Iran’s nuclear program.

Russian and Chinese elites did not want the organisation to be perceived as “anti-American” in orientation, and although both states had significant economic and political partnerships with the Islamic Republic, they also had relations with the United States, which were much more important and substantive. Iran’s hopes of joining the SCO were not helped by Ahmadinejad, who often used SCO summits to forward his disdain for the United States and to bring Iranian nuclear grievances to the fore. For instance, in 2006 at an SCO summit meeting in Shanghai, Ahmadinejad declared that (without mentioning the names of the states he was referring to): “We want this organisation to develop into a powerful body, influential in regional and international politics, economics and trade, and also serve to block threats and unlawful strong-arm interference from various countries.” Going even further, Ahmadinejad went on to add that Russia, China, and the Central Asian republics, as members of the SCO, had to do more to thwart the threat of “domineering powers” in international politics. While Russia and China had consistently opposed US regional agendas, in particular its efforts to promote democracy and regime change in the Central Asia region, they were also extremely uncomfortable with Ahmadinejad and his desire to bring Iran’s nuclear crisis and tense relationship with the United States into the SCO equation. By potentially allowing Iran to join the SCO, Moscow and Beijing feared the prospect of only further regional tension and instability.


49 Smith, Power in the Changing Global Order, 92.

and both states were loath to come into open conflict with Washington. Despite consistent professions of friendship, and interest in allowing Iran to join the SCO, Iran never realistically stood any chance at becoming a full member of the organisation while Ahmadinejad remained president. Despite its best efforts, Iran remained largely isolated and without any “strategic” partners within the international political arena.

6.3 Ahmadinejad Comes to Dushanbe

The international and domestic political rollercoaster ride on which Ahmadinejad had placed Iran had an undeniable impact upon the scope and trajectory of its relations with Tajikistan. Ahmadinejad’s approach to both domestic politics and to Iran’s controversial nuclear dossier in many respects carried over to the way in which he dealt with Dushanbe. In his first state visit to the country in July, 2006, Ahmadinejad met his Afghan and Tajik presidential counterparts, promulgated a range of Iranian investment projects and initiatives, and more notably, promised even further Iranian assistance to its so-called “close cultural cousin”. This first visit to Tajikistan by Ahmadinejad would not only be an instructive example of the Iranian president’s approach to Tajikistan, but also of the inherent challenges faced in wider Iranian-Tajik relations, and the constant controversy that Ahmadinejad courted and seemed to thrive upon.

Arriving in Dushanbe to a rousing public reception, Ahmadinejad inaugurated the opening of the Anzob Tunnel, a project which had originally been promulgated by his predecessor, Khatami. The Iranian government had committed $31 million to the project, while Tajikistan had contributed $7.8 million,\(^{51}\) however it was common knowledge among well-informed Tajiks that a considerable amount of these funds had been siphoned off by the corrupt practices of Tajiks and Iranians alike.\(^{52}\) Furthermore, poor workmanship by the Iranian state-owned company Sobir, who had begun work on the

\(^{51}\) “Iran to Provide Bulk of Money for Finishing Tunnel Construction,” \textit{The Times of Central Asia}, September 6, 2011.

\(^{52}\) Similar comments were made to the author whilst in Dushanbe in May 2013, and have also been reported in David Trilling, "Tajikistan: The Tunnel of Fear," \textit{Eurasianet} (October 1, 2007). http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav100207.shtml, accessed July 3, 2014.
tunnel in 2003, had led Tajik locals to nickname the tunnel Anzob, “the tunnel of death” due to its almost non-existent ventilation and lighting, alongside its poorly-maintained road surface that was often waterlogged and badly potholed due to groundwater that would flood from the tunnel’s crudely-sealed walls. Many Tajik experts interviewed by the author blamed both governments for what one scholar claimed to be a “nightmare” in the building of Anzob, which at the time of writing still has not been completed. However, much of the mirth was aimed squarely at Iran, which was seen to have mismanaged the project and had not carried through with its political and economic promises. Capturing this mood, a noted Tajik scholar was of the opinion that Iran had taken too long to build the tunnel, and that which had taken the Iranians 10 years to build, the Chinese could have done in six months. Going even further, the scholar declared that “basically they screwed up that whole thing. In other words [they misjudged their own capabilities]…and they don’t have the expertise they claim to have.” Nevertheless, despite these criticisms (which were repeated by a number of other Tajik experts), the opening of Anzob was rushed ahead to provide Ahmadinejad with the public relations boon he so often desired. Casting aside, or at least ignoring, the unfinished and poorly-constructed nature of the tunnel, Ahmadinejad bathed in the glow of this Iranian engineering achievement, boasting in front of a crowd of Tajiks Iran’s role in securing their future independence and sovereignty by constructing a tunnel, which would vitally connect Dushanbe to its northern regions. Furthermore, Ahmadinejad blithely declared to the Tajik crowd, “I look at you and I see Iranians” and that “the tears of happiness I see in your eyes are our happiness too”, and highlighted his wish to see further close relations between the peoples of these two states.

Following the opening of the Anzob tunnel, Ahmadinejad proceeded to undertake several discussions with Tajik President Rahmon, whom he had previously met in Tehran in January of the same year. According to a number of US diplomatic cables, which were

53 The author experienced this first hand in May 2013. For a further description see ibid.
54 Independent Historian. Recorded interview with author.
released by WikiLeaks in 2010, senior Tajik officials expressed significant discomfort and worries towards Ahmadinejad’s visit to Dushanbe. In private discussions with United States diplomatic officials, and with the US Ambassador to Tajikistan, Richard Hoagland, the Director of the Tajik President’s Strategic Research Centre, Suhrob Sharipov, acknowledged that Tajikistan did not wish to have its international reputation sullied by politically engaging too closely with Iran. However, Sharipov also noted that Tajikistan desperately required foreign investment, and therefore welcomed Iranian economic assistance. Such a stance was also confirmed by Tajik Foreign Minister Nazarov, who bluntly surmised that it didn’t matter which country invested in Tajikistan as “all money smells the same”, basically alluding to the fact that the country had to take what it could get. In a discussion with Hoagland only days before Ahmadinejad’s arrival, Nazarov continued his somewhat blunt, yet pragmatic assessment of international relations. Speaking openly and frankly about Iran, Nazarov claimed his government had “no special love” for Iran, and simply required its economic assistance above all else. Furthermore, Nazarov also highlighted his fear that Ahmadinejad would make the visit overly “political”, and expressed a strong desire for the visit to stick to the safe realms of discussions on bilateral economic cooperation. As a veteran politician who had displayed a consistent and categorical disdain for Tajikistan’s Islamic opposition, it is no surprise that Nazarov would hold anti-Iranian views, and it seems he had not forgotten Iran’s support for the opposition during the civil war, remarking to Hoagland that Iran’s infrastructure projects in the country were “compensation for the enormous damage” it had done during Tajikistan’s early days of independence—a direct reference to Iran’s support of the IRP.


Unfortunately for Nazarov, his worst fears became a reality. Coinciding with Ahmadinejad’s visit to Tajikistan was the Israeli decision to launch a military offensive into Lebanon, ostensibly to attack Hezbollah militants, a group for which Iran had provided significant financial and military support. Ahmadinejad effectively drew Rahmon into this dispute by using his meeting with the Tajik president as a platform to criticize Israel, and to pressure Rahmon into signing a joint declaration condemning Israel’s “use of force against Palestine and Lebanon”.

In unfamiliar territory, Rahmon stressed that Tajiks as part of the “larger community of Muslims of the world” were of the opinion that the Israeli-Hezbollah dispute had to be resolved through a “political route”, and that Lebanon’s territorial integrity and independence had to be respected. Even Foreign Minister Nazarov for good measure conducted a volte-face from his earlier private comments to US Ambassador Hoagland, urging the Israelis to put an end to what he called a “real war that has already killed more than 400 peaceful Lebanese residents”.

The unexpected and uncharacteristic Tajik political commentary on Middle Eastern affairs overshadowed what was meant to be a rather low-key bilateral set of discussions surrounding agreements in the areas of law and order, tourism, free economic and trade zones, and preferential tariff deals. Instead, Tajikistan found itself at the centre of an international issue that was of little concern to its national interests. As was highlighted in a private discussion with a Tajik international relations scholar: “Tajikistan’s government has no issues with Israel. Hell! If they invested in our projects and provided more money than Iran, they could also be a ‘strategic partner’.” However, economic imperatives outweighed the risks of alienating Iran and its new president on his first state visit to the country. Rahmon and Nazarov’s hope that bilateral talks would stick firmly to


63 Tajik International Relations Scholar. Recorded interview with author.
discussions upon “cultural, commercial, and assistance matters” quickly fell by the wayside, and matters only got worse on the second day of Ahmadinejad’s visit, when he was slated to meet Afghan President Karzai and Rahmon in trilateral discussions.64

The trilateral meeting between Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Iran had been anxiously awaited. Karzai had originally arranged to meet Rahmon and Ahmadinejad in Tehran in January of 2006, but after consultations with the United States withdrew due to “domestic issues”—a not-so-subtle indication that he was pressured by US officials not to attend the meeting.65 Nonetheless, Karzai only played a very low-key role during the meeting, and his arrival late in the afternoon to Dushanbe from Kabul led to only a short overlap with Ahmadinejad’s time in Tajikistan’s capital.66 Despite the international press breathlessly reporting what seemed like an intensification of political relations between these three so-called “Persian states”, very little of substance came out of the meeting, with the three leaders signing a number of memoranda of understanding in the realms of economic cooperation and in combatting drug trafficking and political terrorism.67

At the close of the meeting Ahmadinejad declared simplistically, and somewhat falsely given the ethnic, religious, and linguistic demographics of all three states, that they were “united by a common language, culture, and religion. It’s impossible to divide us by borders or talk about our differences….There are a number of global threats that unite us. Security in Tajikistan and Afghanistan increases Iran's security.”68 In reality however, Afghanistan’s strong links and reliance upon the United States to fulfil its security, as well as Tajikistan’s continued relationship with the United States through basing agreements and cooperation, made such a statement extremely awkward for both the leaders of Afghanistan and Tajikistan. However, it would be the discursive salvo

\[\text{64 Richard Hoagland, "Iranian and Afghan Presidents' Visit to Dushanbe Brings No Surprises, Just Persian Brotherly Love," } \text{Wikileaks (July 27, 2006).} \]
\[\text{65 Ibid.} \]
\[\text{66 Joharifard, "Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan," 74.} \]
\[\text{67 Golovina, "Iran Seeks to Gain Influence in Central Asia."} \]
\[\text{68 Ibid.} \]
Ahmadinejad would launch against the United States that would send Tajik officials into a state of discomfort and annoyance.

Addressing a large assembly of journalists to announce the agreements that the three leaders had signed, Ahmadinejad waited for both Karzai and Rahmon to exit the press conference before launching into a tirade against the United States, declaring that now he could finally “tell you what I really think”, claiming that the United States had “spread slander” against Iran to “conceal its own shortcomings”. According to American diplomatic cables, Nazarov had stressed to Hoagland that he had asked Ahmadinejad not to use the meeting as a platform to criticise the United States, however he could not guarantee that Ahmadinejad would not respond to the “provocations” of the assembled journalists. In later discussions with American diplomats, Nazarov seemed genuinely shocked that Ahmadinejad had used this visit to Tajikistan to express himself in such a way.69

The visit by Ahmadinejad to Dushanbe, and the subsequent controversy he stirred, was a microcosm of Iran’s relations with Tajikistan throughout his presidency. Every trip by Ahmadinejad to Tajikistan, and Rahmon to Iran, revolved around the signing of numerous memoranda of understanding, promises of large-scale economic investment, and the emphasis upon the apparent political and cultural closeness of the two states. Unfortunately, as can be seen in the above visit by Ahmadinejad to Tajikistan, a number of issues plagued inter-state relations between Iran and Tajikistan, and would continue to do so for a number of years to come.

6.4 Iranian-Tajik Economic Relations

Nowhere was the disjuncture between rhetoric and the reality of Iran’s relations with Tajikistan any clearer than in the realm of economic policy and engagement. The Anzob tunnel continued to be a festering wound of exposed rebar and jagged surfaces, which seriously harmed political goodwill towards Iran. This was apparent when in 2013, seven

69 Hoagland, “Iranian and Afghan Presidents’ Visit to Dushanbe Brings No Surprises, Just Persian Brotherly Love".

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years after project was opened to great fanfare by Ahmadinejad, Tajik Transport Minister Nizom Hakimov declared that he preferred that Iran did not complete the project: “We wanted to involve Chinese experts to finish the construction of the tunnel, however, some political considerations did not allow us to do so… I would like to choose a Chinese company, as it is very difficult to work with Iranian companies. They say one thing but act very differently.”

Hakimov’s statement was a damning indictment of Iran’s actions in relation to Anzob. However there were also a litany of other Iranian projects and proposals which were also held hostage to mismanagement, political manipulation, corruption, underfunding, and the impact of international sanctions that stifled Iran’s capabilities to deliver on its economic promises.

These included the establishment of a $2 billion “industrial city”—a project that was announced by Ahmadinejad in March 2012, yet less than a year later was shelved due to the impact of sanctions placed upon Iran—to the construction of numerous hydroelectric projects, cement factories, and roads, tunnels and railways that would connect Tajikistan to Iran’s much vaunted “new Silk Road” to China. These projects were so ambitious in scope and large in scale that many experts, even within Iran, questioned the ability of their own government to carry through with such lofty promises. Nevertheless, it seems that no project or commitment was too large for Iran during Ahmadinejad’s visits.


71 Iranian company Sobir had promised to provide $6 million to rectify the problems with Anzob, but nothing had been done. According to the Iranian government, Anzob’s problems, and the delays in fixing them, did not stem from Iran but were in fact due to power outages, cement shortages, and heavy taxation imposed by the tax office in Tajikistan. See “Bahr Mabradarye Az Faz 2 Neer Va Gah Sangtudeh 2 Anjam Meeshavad.” Institute of Iran and Eurasia Studies. http://www.iras.ir/vdcbw0b5.rhbz9piuur.html, accessed May 5, 2014.


74 Author conversations with Iranian experts.

75 In a scathing article, Alexander Sodiqov outlined a number of these projects which remained unimplemented. The more notable of these projects were the proposed “Industrial City” and the $500
The issues surrounding Iranian economic engagement with Tajikistan were evident in the context of its largest Tajik investment, the Sangtuda-2 hydroelectric plant. Sangtuda-2 was viewed by Iranian officials as a showpiece of Iranian engineering mastery, as well as evidence of Iran’s predominant economic role in Tajikistan. From the Tajik point of view, it was hoped that Sangtuda-2 would be only the first of many Iranian projects which could fulfill the country’s hydroelectric ambitions, and provide the country with much-needed economic independence by lowering its reliance upon neighbouring, energy-rich Uzbekistan. Very quickly, however, Sangtuda-2 ran behind schedule. Initially it was hoped that the project would be finished before Khatami left office in 2005, however construction did not even begin until 2008, with the contract only awarded to Iranian state-owned company Farab in 2007. Although the main factor behind this delay was the need to secure funds and navigate through Iran’s and Tajikistan’s byzantine and inefficient bureaucracies, later delays came with the inability to ship construction materials from Iran to Tajikistan via Uzbekistan, a state that had consistently displayed hostility towards both Tajikistan and Iran throughout the post-Soviet period. Uzbek authorities had instituted a rail blockade upon Tajikistan in 2010 in an attempt to stop the dam’s construction due to fears it would stem the flow of water to Uzbekistan’s large cotton-growing sector. Although Iran threatened Uzbekistan with its own blockade on Uzbek rail cars entering Iran, Uzbekistan only lifted the blockade for a short period of time. In response, Iran had to take the expensive step of airlifting the plant’s transformers and turbines and other construction equipment, totalling more than 75 tonnes, from Iran.

million cement factory in Khatlon, however smaller projects such as health clinics, a tourism college, and a university also seemed to remain in perpetual limbo. See Sodiqov, "Iran’s Latest Investment Pledge Raises Questions in Tajikistan".

No discussion with any Iranian expert or political elite could take place without them mentioning Sangtuda-2 and its importance to Tajikistan.


to Tajikistan, which further delayed the project, and highlighted Iran’s powerlessness in exerting pressure upon Uzbekistan.

With these delays in construction came increased tension between Iranian and Tajik elites, as well as continued questions surrounding the ability of poverty-stricken Tajikistan to pay back the debts it owed to Iran for the building of the dam.\textsuperscript{79} This tension burst out into the open following the opening of Sangtuda-2 in September 2011. Although Ahmadinejad and Rahmon inaugurated the project to much fanfare, it was not fully completed, with only one of the plant’s two 110MW turbines operating. After further delays, which have never been fully explained, Iran planned to finally open the second turbine of Sangtuda-2 in February 2013. However, after Tajikistan’s national energy provider, Barqi Tojik, was unable to pay for the supply of electricity being produced from the hydroelectric station and pay arrears amounting to $12 million to the Iranian operator Sangab, the Iranian company cancelled the full commissioning of Sangtuda-2, and Ahmadinejad postponed his visit.\textsuperscript{80} In lieu of this payment Sangab, a state-run Iranian enterprise, eventually took the drastic step of shutting down the station in winter 2013, which only exacerbated Tajikistan’s energy crisis.\textsuperscript{81} Despite earlier claims by Rahmon that Sangtuda-2 was an “outstanding example of cooperation between Tajikistan and Iran”, and was evidence of the “rapid development and good future of

\textsuperscript{79} Under the initial agreement with Tajikistan, Iran had pledged to contribute $180 million towards the $220 million project. To cover the costs in construction, Iran had intended to own and operate the plant for 12 and a half years. However, following a cost blowout of $36 million, which was paid for by Sangab, it was unclear how Iran would recoup its investment. See "Ahmadinejad Says Iran, Tajikistan Should Guard Interests of Regional States,” \textit{The Times of Central Asia}, September 6, 2011; Mark Vinson, “Ambitious Iranian-Tajik Projects Fact Problems of Geography and Sanctions,” \textit{Jamestown Foundation Eurasia Daily Monitor} 9, no. 109 (June 8, 2012). \url{http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=39482&no_cache=1#.VfGqm52UeSo}, accessed September 10, 2015.


constructive cooperation between our countries”, the facts on the ground told a different story. Sangtuda-2 remained an economic and political debacle of the highest proportions, both for the Tajiks who had expected the project to begin fully operating over a half a decade earlier, and to the Iranian government and its state-run companies who had lost a significant amount of money on building and operating the project.

Despite the issues that surrounded Sangtuda-2, and the constant complaints by Iranian experts that it was Tajikistan’s corrupt business and political environment that was delaying projects in the country, Iran continued to publicly express a strong willingness to invest in other large-scale hydroelectric projects in Tajikistan. For example, Iranian Ambassador to Tajikistan Ali Ashgar Sherdoust proclaimed to local media that Iran would be “involved in the construction of the Roghun hydroelectric power station, both at the governmental level and through the private sector”. The ability of Iran to undertake such a large project, which was slated to cost between $2 billion and $6 billion, was fanciful at best, and it is highly likely that Sherdoust was engaging in nothing more than a game of political one-upmanship after Russia had backflipped on earlier commitments to fund Roghun’s construction. Only adding to the Iran’s publicly professed economic commitments was the Iranian construction company, Farab’s, declaration that following the construction of Sangtuda-2, it would begin construction on the Ayni hydroelectric project. Ahmadinejad was a staunch advocate of the 130MW Ayni hydroelectric station, so much so that on almost every visit to Tajikistan between 2010


and 2013 he would either sign another commitment to its construction, or announce that Iran would start construction soon. At the time of writing, however, Farab—a company with strong links to the IRGC—has done very little to fulfil its previously-made commitments. In the wake of the Global Financial Crisis, and the widening of sanctions upon Iranian companies linked with the IRGC, it became extremely difficult for such Iranian companies to invest in Tajikistan. The impact of these sanctions can be seen in the fact that in 2012 Iran’s state investments in Tajikistan had dropped to $26 million, making it the fifth biggest state investor in the country, from a peak when Iran was Tajikistan’s leading state investor in 2010 with investment figures amounting to $65.2 million. Furthermore, Tajikistan’s at times shady dealings with Iranian businessmen and companies that acted as fronts for IRGC business interests had provided the Tajik government with unwanted international attention, and led to serious misgivings within

85 Discussions with Tajik experts, for information on these visit “Ahmadinezhad Says Tajik-Iranian Cooperation Serves Peace in Region”: “Iran, Tajikistan Ink Agreement on Construction of More Power Plants,” Asia News Monitor, September 8, 2011.


89 For further discussion on IRGC linked companies and Tajikistan, see Vinson, “Ambitious Iranian-Tajik Projects Fact Problems of Geography and Sanctions.”
the Barack Obama administration towards Tajikistan’s unregulated financial sector, which had provided a foothold for Iran to avoid sanctions.90

The questioning of Iranian economic promises and unhappiness towards the standard of Iranian investments in Tajikistan was a consistent theme that was raised in private discussions with the author. Furthermore, Iranian trade experts themselves were aware of their country’s limitations. Although noting that sanctions negatively impacted upon Iran’s ability to fulfil its obligations in Tajikistan, a trade expert from the Iranian government’s Trade Promotion Organisation considered that

Iran itself is the main problem in this case. In fact we haven’t been able to use our potential in a well organised and powerful way. However, because of foreign pressures, and sanctions that Iran has been facing, and international disputes that we are encountering, we couldn’t concentrate on producing better quality goods and services…our companies are facing inflation and other economic issues like foreign exchange rate, and are facing many challenges. In political point of view, we encounter international pressure; for example we can’t import technology from Australia, England, Germany, in order to produce better quality goods. We have enough money for that, but we are not able to import technology because of the political tensions which would have influence on our economy.91

Iran’s empty promises in the construction of a number of large-scale projects, as well as the inability to complete smaller projects such as a three-tower residential and commercial

90 Babak Zanjani, an Iranian businessmen who had close personal links with Rahmon, was arrested following the election of Hassan Rouhani in 2013. Zanjani has been accused of laundering Iranian oil money into Tajikistan to fund his business operations, which included, but were not limited, to a taxi company, bus service, airline, and bank. “Tajikistan: Where Iranian Money Takes a Bath?,” Eurasianet (August 21, 2013). http://www.eurasianet.org/node/67417, accessed July 2, 2014. Even aside from these issues with Tajikistan’s financial sector, the Obama administration actively sought to discourage Tajikistan’s economic links with Iran. For example, during a press conference in Dushanbe on March 27, 2012, Robert Blake, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, called on Tajikistan and the other Central Asian republics to cut their links with Iran. When asked about the question of Iran’s participation in regional infrastructure projects, Blake replied: “Let me just say that consistent with America’s sanctions on Iran, the United States is encouraging all of the countries of the region to avoid trade and other transactions with the government of Iran in order to pressure Iran to engage with the international community about its concerns about Iran’s nuclear program. We believe there are some very good alternatives.” See Robert O. Blake, "Regional Integration: Afghanistan," Assistant Secretary, Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs Robert O. Blake Press Remarks, (March 27, 2012 ). http://www.state.gov/p/scas/rls/rmks/2012/187077.htm, accessed July 31, 2014.

91 Trade Expert. Recorded interview with author.
complex\textsuperscript{92} that now sits as a wasted concrete shell in Dushanbe’s urban heart, was the subject of much anger among Tajikistan’s intelligentsia, and denial and embarrassment among Iranian experts interviewed.\textsuperscript{93} Furthermore, despite Iranian and Tajik leaders alike publicly lauding the level of economic interaction and trade between the two states, which had increased from a bilateral level of $134.6 million in 2006 to $220 million in 2011,\textsuperscript{94} outside of its large state-driven investments Iran was only a minor player in Tajikistan’s broader economy. Privately-run Iranian companies, for instance, only invested $1 million into Tajikistan’s economy in 2009, a figure that paled in comparison to Iran’s Kazakhstani, Chinese, and Russian business rivals.\textsuperscript{95} In particular, Iranian private enterprise often found itself pushed out by the rapidly-increased influence of China. According to an Iranian trade expert,

Ten years ago, China’s trade with countries in Central Asia was less than US$50 million; while today it is billions of dollars. At that time, our trade rate was higher than China’s; so China has grown a lot, while we have stayed where we used to be….Not only is China causing problems for us, but also it is making it difficult for other countries as well. A country like Tajikistan has certain amount of trade capacity, let’s take it as x, if China takes half of it, the share of others decreases; it certainly causes some limitations for the other countries. This is a competition.\textsuperscript{96}

\textsuperscript{92} This project, known as the Burji Sulh, was intended to consist of three towers, which would house conference rooms, apartments, restaurants, and conference facilities. See Bahrom Mannonov, "Dushanbe Mayor’s Office Endorses Design by Iranian Architects for 25-Story High Rise," \textit{Asia Plus} (October 30, 2006). http://www.news.tj/en/news/dushanbe-mayor’s-office-endorse-design-iranian-architects-25-story-high-rise, accessed July 24, 2014.

\textsuperscript{93} For instance, when asked about Anzob, Iranians interviewed often claimed that the tunnel was completed and was of an excellent standard.

\textsuperscript{94} Figures quoted by Iranian and Tajik news agencies are highly exaggerated, and their accuracy should be questioned. However it was widely reported that trade between the two states had hit $250 million in 2012, while the bilateral trade amounting to $229 million in the first nine months of 2013, of which Iran’s imports contributed to $128 million of this figure. Iran’s imports constituted almost 90 percent of this trade flow. See United Nations Comtrade, \textit{United Nations Commodity Trade Statistics Database}.


\textsuperscript{96} Trade Expert. Recorded interview with author.
Among the failures there were success stories, however. For instance, according to official Tajik statistics there were a total of 52 Tajik-Iranian joint ventures operating in the country in 2009, and 20 Iranian companies operating in a number of areas such as livestock, poultry production, and detergent making. The most successful of these ventures included large poultry farms operating in the Sughd and Khatlon provinces, and a tractor manufacturing plant and vegetable oil factory in Dushanbe. Although not of the grand-scale hoped for or claimed by Iran’s president, it appeared that if Iranian policy planners had accepted their limited capabilities, and stuck to much more realistic economic goals in Tajikistan, Iran could have achieved much more success and been the recipient of substantial political goodwill.

6.5 Iranian-Tajik Cultural Engagement

Apart from Ahmadinejad’s strong push to improve Iran’s economic position in Tajikistan was his focus upon cultural diplomacy. Placing a much larger emphasis upon notions of cultural, national, and historical commonality between Tajikistan and Iran than his predecessors had ever done, Ahmadinejad often claimed that Iran and Tajikistan were like “one spirit in two bodies”, and that the two states’ “single history, culture, tradition, and religion” had made them inseparable. Such rhetoric flew in the face of the widely-held view within the international community that Ahmadinejad was nothing more than an Islamist hardliner or revolutionary fanatic, and exposed Iran’s pragmatic use of its national culture and history for political and strategic purposes. Ahmadinejad sought to use Iran’s history and civilisation as a means to bridge political divides and to emphasise commonality with his Tajik counterparts, and avoid wider regional isolation in the face of international pressures. Although warmly embraced by Tajikistan’s intelligentsia, and viewed favourably by Tajikistan’s government who had consistently sought to keep Iran’s

97 Quoted in US Embassy, "Iran's Role in Tajikistan: Limited but Increasing?". Despite numerous claims by Iranian and Tajik officials, Iran’s economic footprint in the country is quite modest. For instance, it is often suggested that there are more than 150 Iranian companies operating in the country. For example see "Envoy: Iranian Companies Implementing over 160 Projects in Tajikistan," Asia News Monitor, May 1, 2013; "FM: Iran-Tajikistan Trade Ties Surpass $210mln in 2012,” Asia News Monitor, July 22, 2013.

ideology and Islamic proclivities at arms-length, Ahmadinejad’s cultural diplomacy efforts were not free from the controversies and issues that dogged Iran’s wider foreign policy agendas, and unfortunately for Ahmadinejad his endeavours were often stymied by mismanagement, over-exuberance, and lingering suspicions relating to Iran’s “real” intentions.

During Ahmadinejad’s presidency he firmly supported the extension and promotion of Iranian arts and cultural festivals, and programs which sought to bolster Persian language and literature in the country. He oversaw the sponsoring of Tajik intellectuals to travel to Iran, and provided stipends and funds for the publication of their works into both the Persian and Cyrillic alphabets. Along with these efforts, the Ahmadinejad administration oversaw the establishment of 17 cultural centres throughout Tajikistan where Tajik students learnt how to read and write in Persian, study the Koran, and also had access to Iranian films, magazines, books, and other materials. These programs were a continuation of policies and actions which had long predated Ahmadinejad’s presidency, and while continuing to support these activities, Ahmadinejad and his administration also sought to institute much grander plans that would use Iranian culture and national history as key diplomatic tool to expand Iran’s political influence in Tajikistan and the wider region. For instance, Nowruz, an ancient Zoroastrian festival celebrating the beginning of the vernal equinox, which had been banned for much of the Soviet period in the Central Asian and Caucasus regions, became a cornerstone of Ahmadinejad’s cultural diplomacy efforts. Although all of the Central Asian republics had openly celebrated Nowruz since the fall of the Soviet Union, on an annual basis


100 Alexander Sodiqov, "Tajik-Iranian Ties Flourish," Jamestown Foundation Eurasia Daily Monitor 8, no. 72 (April 13, 2011) http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=37788&no_cache=1#.VfGqMp2UeSo, accessed September 10, 2015; Sanaei, Relations between Iran and Central Asia, 270-71. The author visited an Iranian cultural centre situated on Rudaki Avenue in Dushanbe. This small facility offers free access to an adjoining library, and provides locals free tuition in Persian language, four times a week. According to staff, on a daily basis at least 10 students use the facility. Furthermore, Iran had also established 30 libraries throughout the country. "Hadat 30 Ketabhane Irane Dar Tajikistan," Institute of Iran and Eurasia Studies, http://www.iras.ir/vdcmn9q.ak9nq4prra.html, accessed May 4, 2013.
Ahmadinejad’s administration encouraged state leaders within the “Iranian plateau”, such as Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Kurdistan, Azerbaijan, and the other Central Asian Turkic republics, to use the occasion as a means to increase political dialogue. The first two International Nowruz Festivals which brought these states together were held in Tehran in 2010 and 2011, and held in the following years in Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Afghanistan. The International Nowruz Festival became an institution for the region’s leaders, and was used as a means to strengthen regional stability and promote “brotherhood”. According to a number of Iranian political experts, this initiative was one of Ahmadinejad’s key foreign policy achievements, and also served a dual purpose in not only promoting regional friendship and cultural commonality, but also allowed Iran another much-needed international platform to highlight its political grievances and fulfil its ambition to be seen as a regional leader.

Another prominent initiative within the Ahmadinejad administration’s cultural diplomatic effort was the establishment of the Persian-Speaking Association between Iran, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan. This association stemmed from the first trilateral meeting that took place between Rahmon, Karzai, and Ahmadinejad in January, 2006, and sought to promote political and cultural commonality between the three states, as well as to discuss measures to address the geographical, economic, and political isolation all three continued to suffer. This somewhat informal association between the three states was often breathlessly referred to as an “alliance” and a “union” among regional observers.


102 For further discussion see Kayhan Barzegar, "Regionalism in Iran's Foreign Policy," Iran Review, (February 8, 2010).


104 For an in-depth analysis of the Persian-Speaking Association see Joharifard, "Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan."
and without doubt Ahmadinejad was confident that by building upon perceived notions of cultural commonality, this association could eventually catapult itself into the realm of a political and strategic alliance. Ahmadinejad’s enthusiasm for expanding political relations through the Persian Speaking Association was shared, rhetorically at least, by Rahmon, who hoped this initiative could balance the influence and pressure of Uzbekistan, and provide Tajikistan with its own regional grouping to rival the Turkish-Speaking Association made up of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and the Kyrgyz Republic. However Afghan President Karzai did not share his two counterpart’s interest in developing closer political links, and displayed only very limited interest for what became one of Ahmadinejad’s pet projects. Karzai was well aware that the extension of the association beyond informal cultural links to a political or strategic alliance would be unacceptable to his American backers, who continued to bankroll his government and acted as a domestic security guarantor within his country. Furthermore, Afghanistan as a multi-lingual and ethnic state, where 35 percent of the population spoke Pashto as a first language made such a project highly problematic. Apart from these obstacles, the Persian-Speaking Association rarely instigated any policies of real substance, and often descended into nothing more than a talk-fest of over-the-top rhetoric and commitments to cooperation, which sounded good on paper and at news conferences, but often failed in practice.

A prominent example of the association’s failure to instigate even the most modest of agendas was the attempt to establish a joint television station, which would air shared content and promote the three states’ so-called shared “Persian culture”. Regrettably this initiative became yet another symbol of Iranian missteps in Tajikistan and the broader region. At the first trilateral meeting between the three leaders in July, 2006, Ahmadinejad


106 Joharifard, "Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan," 77-78.

107 Ibid.
had first advocated this project, but it was not until July, 2008, that a working group of Iranian, Afghan, and Tajik ministers inked an agreement on the establishment of the joint television station, which would be headquartered in Dushanbe and televise programs and news from all the three states, and begin operating in the “very near future.” By 2010, the joint television station was still not in operation, however it was claimed by Tajik Culture Minister Mirzoshohruh Asrori that the station would begin airing during the annual Nowruz celebrations in March, 2010. When interviewed by international news media outlets, Iranian Ambassador to Tajikistan, Sherdoust, claimed that the delays in the project had come about due to “reservations” held by Afghan authorities towards the television channel, and that the issues would be “resolved soon.” Despite the claims by these two political figures, the television station did not begin operations in March 2010, nor were the “issues” surrounding the project ever resolved.

Speaking two years later, Sherdoust claimed that the Tajik authorities now had the television equipment and if they would allow it to be installed, the channel could start operating. However, the Tajik authorities did not allow the equipment to be installed, and by 2012 were demanding that the Iranian embassy pay customs duties totalling $400,000 for the importation of the equipment, which had cost Iranian authorities more than $2.5 million to purchase in the first place. Tajik customs officials claimed that the duties

108 However, the idea of a joint television channel had a long history. Rafsanjani first proposed the idea in 1991. See “Afghan Government 'Cools' Joint Iran-Tajik-Afghan TV Project,” BBC Monitoring Media, April 21, 2010.


111 Ibid. Afghan officials used the excuse that they wanted the television channel to also broadcast in Pashto, not just in Persian, Dari, or Tajiki. See "Afghan Government "Cools" Joint Iran-Tajik-Afghan TV Project."

would be waived if the equipment was to be used strictly by the embassy; if not, the duties would indeed have to be paid. At the time of writing the television equipment remains in a Tajik customs’ warehouse, and eight years since the initial proposal there remains no joint Iranian, Afghan, and Tajik television channel to speak of. While publicly the reasons for this delay have been put down to miscommunication, technical difficulties, Afghan disinterest, and other seemingly “minor issues”, the real reason came down to the fundamental differences that existed between Iran and Tajikistan’s societies and forms of government. Tajikistan’s staunchly secular government, despite the public pronouncements to the contrary, neither had the time nor inclination to support the programming of Iranian television content, particularly content that was religious in nature.114 This is confirmed by a Tajik political scientist, who claimed that

[T]he common TV channel for Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan, this so-called Persian, Farsi speaking channel, has failed mostly because of the Tajik position….Afghanistan also hampered the project for their own reasons. But the major obstacle was the position of the Tajik government.115

This view was backed in an interview with a former advisor to Rahmon. According to the advisor, he was made aware by Tajik government colleagues almost immediately after the signing of the television agreement with the Iranian government that the project was “impossible” to implement. In particular, Tajik elites were concerned with the appearance of females wearing the hijab on television, and the influence of Iranian Islamic mores upon Tajik society. According to the advisor “Iranian TV does not show what Tajikistani TV shows. A woman with an open face, a working woman, a singing woman, a talking woman….Unless the political issue, that is the [Iranian government’s attitude towards

113 Not to mention the differences with Afghanistan, where the country is demographically split among a number of ethnic groups. Furthermore, Afghanistan’s vibrant and comparatively open and well-funded media sector would place such a joint TV channel at a major competitive disadvantage. Many political figures, including Sherdoust, also claimed it was the Afghan government that had delayed the project. See “Afghan-Iranian-Tajik TV Project Still in Limbo,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (May 20, 2011). http://www.rferl.org/content/afghan_iran_tajik_tv_project/24180773.html, accessed July 31, 2014.

114 Marat, “Celebrating Novruz in Central Asia.”

115 Tajik Political Scientist. Recorded interview with author.
society] is not solved, this television station will not be organised.”

When asked publicly about this very issue, the chairman of the Tajikistan Committee for Television and Radio Broadcasting, Asadullo Rahmonov, (apparently jokingly) declared that if the Iranian government insisted that Tajik female presenters wear hijab on programs airing on the proposed television channel, that “we will insist that Iranian female [presenters] do not wear hijab”. While Rahmonov insisted that he had made these comments in jest, the reality is that Tajikistan’s government continued to have lingering suspicions about Iran’s religious ideologies, and the nature of its cultural influence in the country.

These fears were perhaps justified when considering that for nearly every Iranian project that promoted strictly Persian culture and language, there were others which were seemingly much more opaque in their intentions and priorities. For example, Radio Tajiki, also known as “The Voice of Khorasan”, with its links to the IRGC, promoted Iranian government views on international political issues, and described its mission as: “Familiarising audiences with Islam and the message of the Islamic Revolution and the propagation of the pure ideas of the founder of the system of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Imam Khomeini (peace be upon him).” Furthermore, Iranian organisations such as Imam Khomeini Relief Fund (IKRF) also expanded its presence in Tajikistan during Ahmadinejad’s two terms in office. Between 2005 and 2009, for example, IKRF had placed more than 5000 individuals under its “protection”, while also consistently increasing the amount of funds it distributed in the country.

116 Former Presidential Advisor. Recorded interview with author.


119 Furthermore, according to Vinson the works of a number of prominent Iranian Shi’a clerics are translated into Tajik Cyrillic, and promoted by local Tajik thinkers such as Saidyunisi Istaravshani on Tajik websites. Even the former Qazi Kalon of Tajikistan and deputy leader of the IRP, Akbar Turajonzoda, who has had historically strong links with the Iranian government, has had his religious allegiances questioned. Many local Tajik elites claim that he has converted to Shi’ism and is engaging in dissimulation as a means
In addition to this expansion of the presence of IKRF, Iran also increased the availability of stipends and scholarships for Tajik students to study in Iranian universities and madrassas, which caused serious consternation within the Tajik government, and contributed to tension behind the scenes among the elites of both states. Responding to fears that Tajik students were being inculcated with fundamentalist Islamic values which could destabilise the country, Rahmon ordered almost 1400 Tajik students studying in madrassas and Islamic universities in neighbouring countries to return home. Declaring that if Tajik parents did not recall their children from foreign madrassas and Islamic universities, the majority of the students “may turn into extremists and terrorists in five or 10 years’ time”. Of these 1400 students, almost 200 were studying in Iran. There was particular suspicion in relation to Tajik students adopting Shi’ism in Iran and attempting to bring these values back into the country by organising study groups and other gatherings. The Tajik government also cracked down upon Iranian educational

...to promote Iranian religious and political views. In a recorded interview with an independent Tajik historian it was claimed that: “Turajonzoda was accused by the government of celebrating Ashura. Probably, with a hint.... with advice from the government, official religious leadership in Tajikistan accused Turajonzoda of violating his religion and supporting Shi'ism. So, there are a lot of rumours that he is a supporter of Shi’a. A lot of Muslims, probably instigated by someone, accused Turajonzoda of being Shi’ite.” A Tajik political scientist also discussed this topic with the author stating: "Turajonzoda invited some Iranian journalist and the representatives from the Iranian embassy to his mosque during the Ashura. He conducted the Ashura ceremony according to the Sunni traditions, but with the participation of Iranian people. Then, they got a negative feedback from the Muftiat here and also from the government. They both used [this incident] actually to put pressure on him, to limit his influence within the region, to close mosques. Actually, it was purely domestic affair, not really related to Iran. But by many Iranians it was accepted actually as a deed against Iran and against Shi’a.” Tajik Political Scientist. Recorded interview with author.


121 For an in-depth discussion of madrassas in Iran, which are often frequented by Tajik religious students, see Peyrouse and Ibraimov, "Iran's Central Asian Temptations." Apart from religious students, there were 630 Tajik university students studying a range of different topics in Iran, and 950 Iranian university students studying in Tajikistan in 2009. See Mavjouda Hasanova, "Iran's Exhibition Promotes Expansion of Tajik-Iranian Cooperation, Says Iranian Envoy," Asia Plus (July 6, 2009). http://news.tj/en/news/iran-s-exhibition-promotes-expansion-tajik-iranian-cooperation-says-iranian-envoy, accessed July 20, 2014. For suspicions of Shi’a see “Tajikistan and Iran: Is Dushanbe Distancing Itself from Cultural Cousin?,” Eurasianet (March 7, 2011). http://www.eurasianet.org/node/63021, accessed May 31, 2014. An interesting anecdote was communicated to the author by a former Iranian foreign ministry official who spoke about the issues Tajik religious students faced when returning from their studies in Iran: “I was in Tajikistan in 2011, I saw a talib [student] from Qom, he was a Tajik. He said to me ‘when I went to my village I was trying to do the same thing I learnt with my religion that I have learnt for four years, I was
efforts within the country, ordering a local Iranian school run by the Iranian embassy to expel 90 Tajik students, as well as 150 Afghan students. While the official explanation given was that the school only had accreditation to teach children of local Iranians and Iranian diplomats and embassy support staff, Iranian scholars interviewed by the author believe this was just another example of Tajik suspicion and distrust towards Iran. As a former Iranian foreign ministry official pointed out: “There are 12 Turkish-run schools in Tajikistan. I doubt the Tajik government would seek to shut them down, their government claims to be our friend but their actions at times speak otherwise.” 122

In response to these measures a number of Iranian officials cancelled visits to Dushanbe, and as the Tajik government imposed further restrictions upon the practice of Islam in the country, such as banning children from attending mosques and restricting women from wearing the hijab, anger grew among segments of Iran’s government towards Tajikistan’s “Islamophobic rules”. 123 Seeking to tiptoe around these issues and not interfere in Tajikistan’s domestic situation, Iran’s Ambassador to Tajikistan, Sherdoust, declared in an interview (while also conveniently forgetting his own government’s interference in its citizen’s religious and personal rights) that he felt that “beliefs and religion are personal matters and governments should not obstruct people’s beliefs….Religion is a personal matter; no government can take away my religion. I personally believe that governments should not interfere with it.”124 In a conversation with the author an Iranian politician expressed great concern towards the Tajik government’s position towards Islam, and while he unequivocally declared that Iran did not interfere in Tajikistan’s domestic

called an infidel from two talibehs who had returned to my village from Pakistan. They said that I was a liberal and that I shouldn’t be there. They said I was an infidel, so I had to flee my village, because I have been brought up in Qom with this mentality.” In respect to the study bans, the former official disagreed that the Tajik government action was aimed at Iran. He felt that the Tajik government was forced to impose a blanket ban so as not to cause too much of a ruction in relations with other states, such as Pakistan, a destination to which many Tajiks who held “extremist” views had gone to undertake their religious studies. Former Iranian foreign ministry official. Recorded interview with author. The view that this ban was also not aimed at Iran is also advanced in Nourzhanov, "Omnibalancing,” 376.

122 Former Iranian foreign ministry official. Recorded interview with author.
policies towards religion, he felt that Tajikistan had made “the wrong decision” in its crackdown on Islam in the country, and in particular towards students wishing to study in Iran. In fact, he felt that by instituting such anti-Islamic agendas, radicalism would only grow in Tajikistan, and contribute to future instability. Most Iranian scholars interviewed felt that Tajikistan’s hostility towards Islam would continue to act as a challenge towards Iran’s cultural agendas into the foreseeable future, and that while Iran’s money was welcome, its religious influence was not.

6.6 Iranian-Tajik Political and Strategic Engagement

The Ahmadinejad administration couched the motivations for its focus upon Tajikistan in terms of charity, cultural commonality, and concern for their economically poorer Tajik “Persian brothers”, however the reality is that Iran’s motivations were instead driven in a similar manner as during the Rafsanjani and Khatami periods, firmly through strategic and hard-edged political concerns. However, despite leaders in both states loudly proclaiming that Iranian-Tajik relations constituted a strategic partnership, substantive engagement and measurable actions to support such discourse was sorely lacking by the close of Ahmadinejad’s second term. Iran’s ability to carry through on its leader’s rhetoric was very difficult in light of its political and economic emaciation following the imposition of ever-growing economic sanctions and international isolation. However, much more influential in hindering the growth of real, substantive political and strategic ties between Tehran and Dushanbe was Tajikistan’s reluctance to go beyond words to deeds, and its continual and shrewd efforts to take advantage of regional political rivalry to exact political and economic benefits from Iran, bringing into question the rhetoric of political and strategic closeness between the two states.

In comparison to previous Iranian administrations, Ahmadinejad and his colleagues were not afraid to “go all in” in attempting to build political and strategic ties with Tajikistan.

\[125\] Iranian Politician. Personal communication with author.

From the outset of his presidency, Ahmadinejad had declared that there would “no limit” to Iran and Tajikistan’s relations, and that the development, security, independence, and dignity of Tajikistan were Iran’s top priorities. 127 In line with this rhetoric, Ahmadinejad not only attempted to promote close political ties with Tajikistan on a trilateral level—as mentioned above through the Persian-Speaking Association with Afghanistan (the outcomes of which had been quite modest)—but also bilaterally encouraging Tajikistan to sign cooperation agreements in the realms of anti-terrorism, drug trafficking, and military assistance. Furthermore, Ahmadinejad also solicited Tajikistan’s support in its attempts to gain membership to the SCO, with Tajik President Rahmon declaring on a number of occasions that he was happy to facilitate Iran’s eventual accession to this important regional organisation. 128

More important, however, was Ahmadinejad’s apparent success in enlisting Rahmon and his Tajik colleagues to publicly support Iran’s “right” to peaceful nuclear energy. Rahmon insisted on a number of occasions that it was perfectly legitimate for Iran to pursue a nuclear energy program, and asserted that a diplomatic solution needed to be found in the ongoing crisis between Iran and the West. 129 In a statement to the international media in 2012, Rahmon declared in the strongest terms his belief that Iran’s nuclear program was indeed peaceful:

According to our data, the Islamic Republic of Iran is not seeking to obtain or build a nuclear weapon. The Islamic Republic of Iran is on the path of progress, the country is developing…. All the issues, one way or another connected with the nuclear issue, should be resolved only through dialogue and diplomacy. 130


128 "Tajikistan Backs Iran's Bid to Join Shanghai Group," BBC Monitoring Newsfile, March 24, 2008; Akbarzadeh, "Iran and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, 9. Despite Dushanbe’s support, Iran’s accession to the SCO remained out of reach. A Tajik official stated to the author that: “Tajikistan of course supported officially [Iran’s accession]…. Our president declared that Tajikistan is for the accession of Iran as a member. Of course there is a factor that Russia and China did not want to set themselves at the loggerheads with the US and the EU.” Tajik Official. Recorded interview with author.


130 "Tajik President Says His Country Suffering from Sanctions against Iran."
This public support was viewed as important in Iran, which lacked friends in the region and was finding it difficult to count even on the support of its traditional partners in Beijing and Moscow, both of whom baulked at unquestionably supporting Iran’s nuclear stance at the cost of their relations with the West.

Although Tajikistan publicly supported Iran’s nuclear program, behind closed doors Tajikistan’s leaders were not as resolute in their support of Iran, especially in the audience of Western diplomats. As already highlighted above, Tajik elites detested the prospect of finding themselves ensnared within Iranian political and diplomatic foibles, and consistently sought to avoid being drawn into international controversy. Nonetheless, as the nuclear dispute heated up, they would increasingly find themselves between a rock and a hard place, and often drawn into an international feud of which they wanted very little part. By soliciting Iranian economic investment, Tajikistan was expected—if not compelled—by Tehran to support its nuclear program, while at the same time cajoled by officials in Washington to cool political and economic ties with the Islamic Republic.131

In conversations with American diplomats, Tajik elites displayed incredulity towards Iran’s “reckless” stance on the nuclear dossier, and declared that they were against the prospect of Iran gaining nuclear weapons, however they were adamant that they would not confront Iran on this issue because they needed Tehran’s money.132 If the United States and Europe had been willing to fill the economic gap provided by Iranian investment, Tajikistan’s stance may have altered in respect to the nuclear dispute.133

The difficult position Tajikistan found itself in, and its somewhat conflicted public and private stance towards Iran’s nuclear program, carried over to other areas of the two


132 "Tajikistan's Sharipov Discusses Corruption, Iran, Russia, Hydro-Power Politics".

133 However, it is also interesting to note that there were rumours that if there was a vote on the floor of the UN General Assembly in relation to Iran’s nuclear program, that Tajikistan would abstain from voting. Such a move would have been a clear signal that Tajikistan was unwilling to continue supporting Tehran after many years of consistently voting against numerous UN resolutions relating to Iran. See “Tajikistan: Iran Points Delivered”; “United Nations General Assembly Voting Records,” General Assembly of the United Nations, http://www.un.org/en/ga/documents/voting.asp, accessed January 15, 2015.
state’s political and strategic ties. While happy to sign innumerable cooperation agreements with Iran in a range of different fields, which would give off the impression that ties between the two states were strong, when the time came to actually implement and bring about real measureable cooperation it seems that Tajikistan’s elites lacked the stomach to carry through with their publicly-stated positions. For example, following the signing of a defence cooperation agreement between the Iranian Defence Minister, Brigadier General Ahmad Vahidi, and his Tajik counterpart, Colonel General Sherali Khayrulloev, in Dushanbe in May, 2010, Vahidi spoke enthusiastically of the potential expansion of defence relations between the two states, declaring: “Iran follows long-term and strategic relations with Tajikistan…[and] believe[s] that powerful neighbours can pave the way for their progress and development if [they] stand by each other.” 134 While such comments were music to the ears of Rahmon, further comments made by Vahidi during his visit were viewed with suspicion by the Tajik president. According to Nourzhanov, Vahidi had during his visit made a series of statements that were construed by local and Russian experts as Tehran’s promise to render direct military assistance to Tajikistan, and even a testing ground for the possibility of assuming some form of joint control over northern Afghanistan. This was a bit too much for the President of Tajikistan, on whose assistance another planned briefing featuring Gen. Vahidi was abruptly cancelled. Rahmon’s press service issued a curt and dry statement cutting further speculation: “The President of the Republic of Tajikistan, having expressed satisfaction with the current level of cooperation with Iran, called on the defence institutions in both countries to broaden engagement in all directions.” 135

Unfortunately for Iranian elites, it seems Tajikistan was never willing to establish “real” strategic and defence ties with Iran, and the actions taken by Rahmon towards Vahidi continued a long line of Tajik repudiations of Iranian defence and strategic overtures. This was aptly pointed out in an interview between the author and a researcher from an Iranian think tank, when she noted that

[W]e sign many agreements with Tajikistan, but I would not call Iran’s relationship with Tajikistan as strategic. The Tajik government has not and never will allow Iran

135 Nourzhanov, "Omnibalancing,” 370.
to establish military bases there, they have never sent their military officers here to Iran for training, and we never have joint military manoeuvres…it is very difficult to say that Iran and Tajikistan have a strategic relationship.\textsuperscript{136}

Overwhelmingly, Iran as a “strategic partner” to Tajikistan was much more a myth then a reality. Although this was the case, Tajikistan was also only too willing to use Iran in a manipulative fashion to improve its strategic value and ward off regional threats.

Tajikistan’s tense relationship with Uzbekistan and its at times complicated ties with Russia played a crucial role on impacting Tajik-Iranian strategic ties. Uzbekistan’s dalliance with the United States, which came to an abrupt halt following the Andijan uprising of 2005, led to a gradual warming of ties between Moscow and Tashkent. This warming of relations between Tajikistan’s major foe and its traditional security guarantor caused bewilderment in Dushanbe, where there was a fear that Moscow was turning its back on Tajikistan in favour of Uzbekistan.\textsuperscript{137} Such fears were placed into sharp relief following Uzbek President Karimov’s highly-touted visit to Moscow at the end of 2007, in the midst of massive energy shortages and a food crisis brought upon partly by Uzbek unilateral blockades of Tajikistan’s borders and energy grid. Following Karimov’s visit to Moscow, Rahmon also sought out new partners, and in a surprise move went to Tehran where he basked in the glow of Iranian political and economic support for his country. This visit was portrayed as a major development by the Tajik media, who lauded Iran’s financial contributions, which would apparently alleviate Tajikistan’s energy and food shortages.\textsuperscript{138} Abdulloh Rahnamo of Tajikistan’s Strategic Research Centre noted that Russia had historically been Tajikistan’s “best partner”, but its changing position in regards to Uzbekistan had left the country in a “hard situation”, meaning that Tajikistan’s government desperately required new international partners, and was much more amenable to pursuing relations with Iran in this context.\textsuperscript{139} Only adding impetus for

\textsuperscript{136} Researcher, Recorded interview with author.

\textsuperscript{137} For a further discussion of Uzbek-Russian ties post 2005 see Trenin, “Russia and Central Asia: Interests, Policies, and Prospects,” 75-136.


\textsuperscript{139} Ibid.
Tajikistan to continue to pursue strong ties with Iran was Russia’s cancellation of its investment in the Roghun hydroelectric project in 2008, viewed by Tajik experts as only a further symbol of Russia’s “siding with” Uzbekistan in its long-running feud with Tashkent over water and energy supplies. This decision by Moscow only accentuated the apparent rift between Tajikistan and Russia, leading Rahmon to cancel a meeting with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev in early 2009, while inviting Iranian trade and defence ministers to Dushanbe in a not-so-subtle nod towards Tehran at Moscow’s expense.\footnote{Farangis Najibullah, "Trip Cancellation Fuels Rumors of Rift in Tajik-Russian Relations," \textit{Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty} (February 2, 2009). \url{http://www.rferl.org/content/Trip_Cancellation_Raises_Doubts_About_TajikRussian_Relations/1377978.html}, accessed July 20, 2014.}

Tajikistan’s courting of Iran to balance the threat of Uzbekistan, and to perhaps step into the breach left by Moscow’s warming relations with Tashkent, was duly accepted by Iran. Whereas Khatami and Rafsanjani had always attempted to take a neutral stance in the plethora of Central Asian political squabbles, and not involve Iran in the ongoing dispute between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, Ahmadinejad and his colleagues displayed no such restraint. As has already been mentioned in this chapter, under the leadership of Ahmadinejad, Iran strongly supported the construction of the Roghun and Ayni hydroelectric power projects, which were initially slated to be constructed by Russia and China respectively,\footnote{Both states pulled out of these projects in the face of Uzbek pressure.} and also was a strong critic of Uzbekistan’s blockade of Tajikistan, much to the chagrin of Tashkent. The Ahmedinejad administration’s efforts to portray itself as a key backer and strategic partner to Dushanbe were evident in the comments made by former first Vice President and Presidential Chief-of-Staff Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei. According to Mashaei, Iran disagreed strongly with Uzbekistan’s stance on Tajikistan, and argued that Tashkent should not view its relations with Iran separately from Tajikistan. Furthermore, he declared that “the government of Iran stands by the state and nation of Tajikistan. We regard this as a strategic policy and will not desist from it. It is our policy to expand our cooperation with Tajikistan in a strategic manner.”\footnote{Quoted in Nourzhanov, "Omnibalancing," 372.} While

\footnote{Quoted in Nourzhanov, "Omnibalancing," 372.}
the local media breathlessly reported the words of Mashaei and claimed that Karimov had finally “been defeated”, Uzbekistan continued its blockade, thus ignoring what ended up being an empty set of Iranian threats.

As tensions continued between Tajikistan and Dushanbe into 2011, Tajik Defence Minister Sherali Khairulloyev shocked many when he declared during a visit to Tajikistan by Ahmadinejad that

[T]oday, if necessary, the Islamic Republic of Iran’s Armed Forces can reach Tajikistan in two hours….We support each other under any conditions and both friends and foes consider us as two friendly and brotherly countries.143

According to a number of Tajik experts, this statement by Khairulloyev was not only aimed at Uzbekistan but also Russia, who was in the process of negotiating a new military-basing agreement with the Tajik government. In comments made to Eurasianet, Arkady Dubnov, a journalist and Central Asian expert, was of the opinion that “Rahmon’s dalliance with Iran is aimed at Russia, telling Moscow that is has other friends who could protect it, too”.144 Unfortunately, the absurdity of an apparent Tajik-Iranian strategic partnership was made clearer only a couple of days later when a small contingent of Iranian soldiers was invited to attend Tajikistan’s independence day parade. As the troops embarked upon their journey from Iran their flight was blocked from entering Turkmen and Uzbek airspace. The Iranians, according to Kucera, were forced, ironically, to reroute through Afghanistan, whose airspace at the time was controlled by the United States, Iran’s arch foe.145

Despite the Tajik government’s seeming embrace of Iran, elites in Dushanbe knew that Iran could not be relied upon as a military and strategic partner. Furthermore, without Moscow’s military and political support the country would be placed at the mercy of a much stronger Uzbekistan, which would also leave the country much more open to


144 Ibid.

145 Ibid.
instability emanating from its southern Afghan border. Eventually this bumpy patch in relations with Russia was overcome, with Moscow’s integral role in Tajikistan confirmed in October, 2013, when the Tajik Parliament ratified a deal extending Russia’s military presence in the country for another three decades. While numerous defence pacts and cooperation agreements were signed throughout Ahmadinejad’s presidency, Tajikistan showed very little interest in building substantive cooperation with Iran in this field. By the close of Ahmadinejad’s presidency in 2013, Iran remained a very minor player in Tajik strategic affairs despite the public rhetoric to the contrary. Instead, Tajikistan often used Iran in a manipulative fashion to improve its strategic value and ward off regional threats, particularly in the context of its relationship with Uzbekistan. In the Machiavellian world of international politics, Tajikistan, a small and insecure state, understandably put its own strategic and political self-interests above all else, and it seems unlikely that the country even pursued a strong strategic relationship with an Iran that was increasingly under siege and isolated.

Nevertheless, what could be considered a relationship of convenience was by no means one-sided, and was in many respects reciprocated by Iran, who really only began to focus upon Tajikistan as international economic and political isolation began to bite early on in Ahmadinejad’s first presidential term. For all of Ahmadinejad’s ebullient rhetoric, he carried on a long history of Iranian foreign policy pragmatism, and behind the façade of populism was a shrewd desire to expand Iranian influence eastwards as a means to avoid isolation stemming from the West. Such a view is confirmed by an Iranian academician, who suggested that as the international pressure on Iran increased over recent years, so too did Tajikistan’s importance. She predicts however that when, or if, this pressure eventually does decrease, so will Iran’s interest in Tajikistan, which will be relegated to a second-rate and peripheral position within modern Iranian foreign policy.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁶ Professor of Political Science. Personal communication with author.
6.7 Conclusion

Although Ahmadinejad and his administration placed a significant emphasis upon building multifaceted cultural, economic, and political relations with Tajikistan, Iran was largely unable to fulfil its agendas. The impact of sanctions, international isolation, and regional rivalry often left Iranian-Tajik relations at the mercy of factors far beyond either state’s control. It is also apparent that despite the friendly rhetoric exhibited by elites in both states, tension and suspicion often lay just below the surface of the bilateral relationship. Tajikistan’s elites, while publicly stating their willingness to engage substantively with Iran in all facets, were in practice less sanguine at the prospects of deep ties. Iran was often viewed with caution among some segments of Tajikistan’s political elite, especially those who held strong secular biases. Iran did its best to overcome these suspicions by focusing heavily upon the cultural bonds that were believed to exist between the two states, and did make some strong inroads in creating goodwill among Tajikistan’s public. Nonetheless, some of Iran’s more religiously ambiguous cultural programs and initiatives did little to prevent suspicions that Iran held an Islamist agenda in Tajikistan.

While Iran may not ever overcome fears towards its Islamic nature and political heritage, this factor played very little role in contributing to the underlying issues that have plagued its relations with Tajikistan in recent years. Rather, the main factor that limited Iran’s interactions with Dushanbe was the consistent mismanagement of this inter-state relationship by Iranian political elites. Throughout Ahmadinejad’s presidency Iran promised a lot but at times delivered very little. Many of Iran’s economic projects suffered from funding issues, or technical shortcomings, which were ignored for the sake of an often misguided desire to display that Iran was somehow Tajikistan’s foremost international partner. Compounding this theme of mismanagement was the fact that on almost every visit to Tajikistan by Ahmadinejad and his cadres, a new political and economic commitment was made or agreement signed that Iran had little intention, or ability, to fulfil. These actions spoiled Iran’s reputation among Tajikistan’s political elite, many of whom would often question, both in public and in private, Iran’s reliability as an economic and political partner.
Unfortunately for Iran, the great hopes of a deep, multifaceted, Iranian-Tajik relationship have yet to come to pass. Although Iran and Tajikistan share many common bonds, which will ensure relations into the future, Iran has not done enough to use its cultural, political, and economic assets to best effect in Tajikistan. Despite claims to the contrary, Iran remains a secondary player in Tajikistan, and does not wield the influence so often portrayed both within Iran and the wider international community. Instead, Iran’s relations with Tajikistan, particularly during the period of Ahmadinejad’s presidency, is a prominent, yet understudied example of Iranian foreign policy underperformance in a context and country where it should be playing a much more substantial role.
Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore Iran’s foreign relations with Tajikistan between 1991 and 2013. In attempting to uncover the basis and outcomes of Iranian-Tajik ties, it argued that relations between the two states had been consistently hampered by not only mutual mistrust and misunderstanding, but also significant regional and international constraints, which cruelled the ability for Iranian and Tajik elites to sustain close bilateral political, economic, cultural, and strategic relations over the past two decades. In analysing the course of Iranian-Tajik ties, the thesis applied the approach of neoclassical realism, which provided a useful framework for what is a multifarious and highly complex bilateral relationship. The dissertation filled a major gap in the literature on Iranian-Tajik relations, which has rarely been the focus of in-depth scholarly analysis.

The analysis of Iran’s relations with Tajikistan, from the fall of the Soviet Union to the conclusion of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s term in office, provided a number of key insights into what is a relatively new bilateral relationship. From the outset of Tajikistan’s independence, Iranian political elites displayed a consistent interest in developing a close relationship with a state, which has often been called a “cousin” and “brother” on account of shared language, history, and culture. These bonds have played an important role in focusing Iran’s attention upon Tajikistan, and framed much of Tehran’s policies in the country. Nevertheless, the presence of a real or imagined shared culture and history between Iran and Tajikistan should not be seen as the prime element, or driver, shaping Iran’s interests in the country. Rather, Iran’s interests in Tajikistan have almost solely related to wider geopolitical concerns. Tajikistan has, since its independence, formed a small, albeit important, cog in Iran’s efforts to develop political and economic relevance in a region where Iranian elites feel they irredeemably belong. In the eyes of Iran’s government, Tajikistan constitutes a strategic and economic pivot point in its attempts to further integrate into Central Asian political and economic structures, and to avoid further international isolation particularly at the hands of the United States. Furthermore, Tajikistan’s somewhat non-fortuitous position on the doorstep of the perennially-unstable Afghanistan has only sharpened the interest of Iran’s elite, who see vital importance in attempting to develop a well-rounded strategic, political, and economic relationship with Dushanbe.
When ascribing relations with Tajikistan, Iranian elites have sought to highlight an exceedingly harmonious bilateral relationship with Dushanbe, which is deep and multifaceted in nature, and more often than not, Iran has used its relations with Tajikistan as a symbol of its constructive economic and political approach to regional affairs, and an example of a key international strategic partnership. Indeed, it the case that Iran has played a critical role in developing major parts of Tajikistan’s infrastructure, and has been a reliable political partner to the government of President Emomali Rahmon, particularly over the past decade. However, such narratives gloss over the serious obstacles which have faced Iran in its efforts to develop close ties with Tajikistan. In particular, Iran has had to grapple with almost constant mistrust towards its intentions from Tajikistan’s highly secularised elite, and has been unable to form a clear plan or roadmap for its policies in the country. Furthermore, the presence of instability within Tajikistan and the wider region, as well as the ever-tightening noose of international sanctions, have also created significant obstacles in front of Tehran’s agendas in the country.

Rather than being viewed as an example of “success”, Iran’s foreign policies in Tajikistan should be considered an unhappy symbol of Iranian dysfunction and underperformance in the context of the Central Asian region.

**Lingering Mistrust**

Trust, or the lack thereof, has been an issue which has been consistently raised throughout the thesis. Despite the oft-mentioned presence of cultural and historical commonalities and apparently close political interests, Iran’s theocratic political model and Shi’a religion has fuelled almost constant suspicion among Tajikistan’s political elite towards Iran’s “real intentions”. In particular, Iran’s conduct during the Tajik Civil War, and its support of the main opposition group the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), remains a controversial topic, which is often highlighted by important segments of the Tajik elite as an example of Iran’s ambiguous foreign policy objectives. However, as has been shown in this thesis, Iran’s support for the IRP was never primarily based upon ideological considerations, nor was this support as strong as has been consistently alleged.

At the fundamental level, Iranian elites are well aware of the ideological fissures that existed, and continue to exist, between their Shi’a Islamic Revolution and the Sunni-inspired ideology of the IRP. Iran’s support for the IRP during the Tajik Civil War was
based not on the fact that it was the most ideological, but rather because it was the strongest of the opposition groups with the best chance of succeeding in the conflict. Political motivations aside, Iran’s early strategic calculation that the IRP, in partnership with a number of regional-based and secular-nationalist groups, would eventually defeat Tajikistan’s communists was found to be flawed. Instead, the eventual rise to power of the staunchly secularist Rahmon and his former Communist cadres placed Iran at a political disadvantage as it sought to build state-to-state ties in the early stages of Tajik independence. Rahmon’s government has at various points throughout its two-decade rule questioned the nature of Iranian policies in Tajikistan, and also sought to leverage the influence of Iran and its apparent ideological agendas to gain support from rival state actors such as Russia and the United States. The stigma surrounding Iran’s allegedly ideological approach to Tajikistan’s civil conflict remains a burden, which continues to act as a wellspring of mistrust among important segments of Tajikistan’s secularist political elite.

In an effort to overcome negative perceptions, Iran has had to act in an overwhelmingly cautious manner towards Tajikistan throughout the post-civil war period. Iran’s elites almost completely and purposefully preclude any mention of Shi’ia Islam or revolutionary-inspired discourse when engaging in bilateral dealings with the Tajik government. Throughout his time in office, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a known firebrand who was only too willing to engage in the discourse associated with the Islamic Revolution, rarely did so in the context of Tajikistan. Instead, Ahmadinejad sought to build common ground and good relations with Tajik elites through emphasising apparent cultural and historical commonalities and shared political and economic interests. Nevertheless, numerous Iranian cultural projects over the past 15 years, which have sought to improve inter-societal ties, including the establishment of a Persian-speaking television channel, educational programs, charitable initiatives, and cultural exchanges, have often fallen victim to the sensitivities that exist within the Tajik elite towards Islam and Iran.

Despite the mistrust that exists just below the surface of Iranian-Tajik relations, there is very little evidence to suggest that Iran has sought to systematically influence Tajik religious life, or spread its revolutionary ideology to Tajikistan. Rather, suspicion towards Iran’s “real intentions” has much more to do with the secularist nature of the Tajik elite,
rather than any of Iran’s historical or current policies. It could be argued that even if Iran had not supported the IRP during the early part of the Tajik Civil War, mistrust towards its agendas in the country would nevertheless remain a salient and important issue in influencing the course of bilateral relations.

**Mismanagement**

Fear of Iran’s Islamic political heritage by the Tajik elite has indeed acted as an obstacle to the fulfilment of Iran’s foreign policy agendas in Tajikistan. Arguably however, a much more important factor has been the consistent mismanagement of this inter-state relationship by Iranian political elites themselves. Throughout the post-civil war period in particular, Iran has had considerable opportunities to become one of Tajikistan’s preeminent international partners. However, throughout both the presidencies of Mohammed Khatami and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Iran largely acted in a reactive, ad-hoc, and at times dysfunctional manner when implementing its foreign policies in Tajikistan.

For example, in the immediate aftermath of the Tajik Civil War, Tajikistan’s government firmly looked towards Iran to assist it in post-conflict redevelopment. Iran had significant expertise and capacity to fulfil Tajikistan’s vital infrastructural needs, particularly in the fields of energy production, dam construction, and road building. But rather than seek to expand Iran’s influence in Tajikistan, Khatami’s administration displayed very little interest in Tajikistan’s post-civil war redevelopment, instead focusing much of its attention upon “big ticket items” such as engaging in a so-called “dialogue between civilisations” with the West.

This lack of political interest in Tajikistan only ended following the events of September 11, 2001, and the invasion of Afghanistan by the United States in the following months. The presence of American military forces within Central Asia created considerable uncertainty among Iranian policy elites, who viewed the expansion of American influence in the region as a further move to militarily encircle the country and expand its international isolation to the Central Asian region. Unfortunately for Tehran, Tajikistan enthusiastically welcomed the US presence in the region, and as a reward for its loyalty in the “War on Terror”, Dushanbe received substantial US economic aid and security assistance. Using and building upon its newfound importance to the United States and the
West, Rahmon was able to leverage his country’s “newfound importance” to gain economic benefits from its major benefactor, Russia, as well as increasing Iranian investment in his country.

Newfound Tajik confidence and assertiveness on the international stage, alongside the presence of Iran’s major political rival the United States within Tajikistan, had the effect of acting as a lightning rod for Iranian-Tajik relations in the post 9/11 period. Iran scurried to increase its presence in Tajikistan, and quickly affirmed its commitment to assist Tajikistan in raising its material standards of living. In particular, Iran focused on large-scale infrastructure projects which would better link Iran to Tajikistan and Central Asia, and solidify its place as a long-term international partner to Dushanbe. Such examples of this approach included the construction of the strategically important Anzob tunnel, as well as the Sangtuda-2 hydroelectric station. These projects were warmly welcomed by the Tajik government, however, they later became a major source of friction following years of cost overruns, delays, and mutual accusations of corruption and poor management. The jewel in Iran’s investment crown, the Sangtuda-2 project, for instance, was initially slated to be completed before Khatami left office in 2005, however construction did not even begin until 2008. The Anzob tunnel remained uncompleted in 2013, despite its grand opening by Ahmadinejad in 2006. Beyond these projects were a litany of other Iranian proposals that were held hostage to mismanagement and capacity shortcomings. From the establishment of a $2 billion “industrial city”, a project that was announced in 2012, to the construction of numerous hydroelectric projects, cement factories, and roads, tunnels, and railways that would connect Tajikistan to Iran and beyond to China as part of a so-called “new Silk Road”, Iran more often than not over-promised yet under-delivered.

Iran’s empty promises in the construction of a number of large-scale projects, as well as the inability to complete smaller projects, were the subject of much anger among Tajikistan’s intelligentsia, and denial among Iranian experts interviewed for this dissertation. Rather than develop manageable and achievable goals, under the presidencies of both Khatami and Ahmadinejad Iran often seemed to make policy on the fly, or undertook their agendas as a direct response to other events occurring in the region. Iran’s inability to form a coherent approach to Tajikistan and follow through on its economic and political promises damaged its credibility, and has ensured that in recent
years Tehran has often been passed over by Tajik elites in favour of more “reliable” partners in Beijing, Astana, Moscow, and Ankara.

**International Constraints**

The mismanagement of Iran’s relationship with Tajikistan has in many respects been amplified by the difficult international position in which Tehran has found itself throughout the post-revolutionary era. Iran has had to deal with almost constant turbulence on its borders, which has focused much of its attention and political capacity, as well having to overcome a consistent effort by its international rivals, particularly the United States, to sideline it from Central Asian affairs.

Iran’s toxic relationship with the United States has had a major impact on the course of Tehran’s ties with Dushanbe. The US-imposed sanctions have throughout the post-Cold War period, and earlier, weakened Iran’s economic capacity and ability to implement its regional agendas to a great extent, and played a major role in thwarting Iranian policies in Tajikistan. At the same time, the much stronger Russia and China have undermined Iran’s foreign policy agendas in Tajikistan, and sought to consistently sideline Tehran from regional economic and political institutions such as the SCO, thus lowering the attractiveness of Tehran as a potential political and strategic partner.

Rather than being an economic and political lynchpin in Central Asia, Iran has instead been used as a pawn by both its regional allies and rivals alike, with Tajikistan being no exception. Throughout the thesis it was shown that Tajik elites used Iranian interest in their country to bargain for greater economic and strategic benefits from third-party countries, particularly the United States and Russia, and were more often than not unwilling to go from “words to deeds” in pursuing all-round political relations with Tehran. While happy to sign innumerable cooperation agreements with Iran in a range of different fields, which gave the impression that ties between the two states were strong, when the time came to actually implement and bring about real measurable cooperation, Tajikistan’s elites rarely, if ever, followed through with their publicly-stated positions.

These actions were not only that of a small state rationally hedging its international position to ensure regime survival, but were also a symptom of Iran’s poor regional standing. In particular, as Tajikistan’s relative importance grew in the post-9/11 period,
its elites displayed less enthusiasm for developing all-out relations with one of the most politically-isolated states on earth, and one which looked almost certain to be the next target for US regime change. While Tajik officials publicly embraced Iran, it appears that they were never fully comfortable in establishing all-out relations with Tehran. Rather, in private conversations with American diplomats, Tajik elites displayed incredulity towards Iran’s reckless stance on the international stage, particularly in regards to its disputed nuclear program, and sought to distance themselves from relations with Tehran.¹ Similar dynamics also occurred in respect to Moscow. While Tajikistan often would talk up the potential for defence and strategic ties with Iran in public, elites in Dushanbe knew that Iran could not be relied upon as a military and strategic partner, and that without Russia’s support their country would be increasingly vulnerable to further pressure from neighbouring Uzbekistan, and instability emanating from Afghanistan.

The unwillingness of Tajik elites to pursue substantive ties was particularly humiliating for Tehran as it grew ever more isolated into the second term of Ahmadinejad’s presidency. While Rafsanjani and Khatami were largely circumspect in their efforts to develop relations with Tajikistan beyond the field of economics, Ahmadinejad made an all-out effort to build political and strategic ties with Tajikistan as a means to not only solidify Iran’s influence, but also to avoid complete isolation from the Central Asian region through American encirclement. Unfortunately for Tehran, the wider impact of its international relations could not be removed from its bilateral relations with Dushanbe. Tehran’s often timid deference to Moscow, its economic weakness in comparison to China, and much more importantly its fraught relationship with the United States, cruelled the ability of Iran to establish “all-out” ties with Dushanbe.

Despite the presence of strong ethno-linguistic bonds and a set of shared mutual threats and strategic interests, close ties between Iran and Tajikistan have not ensued in the post-Soviet era. Instead, Iran must be considered an important, albeit secondary, player in

¹ Hoagland, "Tajikistan's Sharipov Discusses Corruption, Iran, Russia, Hydro-Power Politics."
Tajikistan’s affairs. Despite the rhetoric to the contrary, bilateral ties between the two countries have not reached a strategic level.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This thesis, as the first English language, in-depth scholarly analysis of Iran’s relations with Tajikistan, was necessarily broad in scope. This breadth therefore provides future researchers with significant opportunities to delve much deeper into various areas of this critically important bilateral relationship.

While the researcher spent a significant amount of time interviewing those with critical knowledge of Iran’s relations with Tajikistan during the Tajik Civil War, it appears that the full story of this period has yet to be fully canvassed. In particular, gaining access to primary Russian, Tajik, and Iranian archival material from this period would arguably provide further critical insights that the researcher was unable to glean from primary interviews and secondary research resources alone. Furthermore, as time passes, those with first-hand knowledge of the Tajik Civil War are arguably much more willing to share their insights into this critical period of relations, and an effort by a future researcher to gain access to a much larger sample of elites who were involved in this period of events should be considered. In particular, gaining access to not only Tajik and Iranian, but also Russian and Uzbek experts and elites involved in the Tajik Civil War would provide a much broader and well-rounded picture of Iran’s influence in this conflict.

Another area of research, which was only briefly discussed in this thesis but should not be overlooked, is the influence of Iranian non-governmental and parastatal organisations in Tajikistan. Arguably, organisations such as the IKRF have played a crucial role in Tajikistan since its independence, however, their actual role and influence in the country has not been researched to any great extent, due to a dearth of publicly-available information and a lack of access to key policymakers. Furthermore, the researcher was unable to develop a clear picture of the role Iranian bonyads play in Tajikistan. While it was brought to the researcher’s attention in numerous interviews that bonyads, particularly those affiliated with the IRGC, were heavily involved in Tajikistan’s economy, ascertaining the veracity of such claims and the possible influence of such parastatal organisations could not be established, and should indeed be the subject of future research.
Finally, this thesis placed the major focus of its research on the “measurable” material aspects of Iran’s influence in Tajikistan—particularly in the economic and diplomatic fields. The notion that cultural similarities and historical commonalities were over-emphasised by not only Tajik and Iranian elites, but also scholars and analysts who have studied this bilateral relationship, was highlighted throughout the thesis. However, this should not undermine the importance of culture as a topic of future research and one that future researchers may find of greater importance than that which was attributed within this thesis. In particular, undertaking analysis of important texts and discourses employed by not only policy elites, but also so-called “thought leaders” in both Iran and Tajikistan, would provide a useful ideational rejoinder to the materialist focus of this thesis.

**Final Remarks**

At the time of writing, Iran remains under some of the most stringent economic sanctions and international political restrictions known in modern political history. While the election of President Hassan Rouhani in May, 2013, has improved his country’s image on the international stage, Iran remains an international pariah, and has been unable to fully integrate itself within global affairs. If the nuclear deal signed between the EU3+3 and Iran is successfully implemented in the coming weeks and months ahead,² prospects of a much more engaged and materially-capable Iran is without question highly likely to become a reality.

As shown in this thesis, Iran’s influence and interests in Tajikistan have been consistently burdened by its broader relations with the international community and by severe restrictions, which have curbed its capacity and ability to act as a normal state actor. If such a burden is lifted, Iran’s efforts to improve its economic and political influence not only in Tajikistan, but also the wider Central Asian region, may finally be fulfilled.

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² On 14 July the P5+1 and Iran adopted a final agreement on Iran’s disputed nuclear program. Under the terms of the agreement, the EU and the United States have agreed to lift their economic sanctions upon Iran. However, the lifting of economic sanctions will not take place until the IAEA first confirms that Iran has fulfilled a series of technical steps, including the dismantling of key nuclear infrastructure. Steps which, at the time of writing have yet to take place.
The lifting of sanctions would point to an increase in Iranian influence and interests in Tajikistan and Central Asia. However, this potential development should not be viewed in negative terms. While numerous Middle Eastern states fear the rise of an Iran unshackled, Tehran’s Central Asian neighbours should embrace the opportunities that will come with an Iran that is better linked to world markets, and one that could provide the region with a further avenue to diversify their relations and avoid over-reliance—both politically and economically—upon Russia and China. Furthermore it should indeed be reaffirmed that Iran has consistently shown throughout the post-Soviet period that it desires to see a stable and prosperous region on its northern and eastern borders, and the notion that Iran may spread disorder in this context should be dismissed.

Although Iran will be offered significantly greater opportunities to increase its political and economic influence in Tajikistan and the wider Central Asian region if sanctions are lifted, this does not mean that a carte blanche will be given to Tehran moving forward. Iran will not only need to develop a clear strategy and approach to the region, but also will need to overcome its consistent inability to act in an efficient and effective manner and repair the damage that has been done to its reputation through the years of mismanagement of its relations with Tajikistan and the other regional states. If such steps can be taken, Iran may finally become a critically important player in Tajikistan and the broader Central Asian region.
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