

Crafting Influence: Iran's Shaping Operation in Tajikistan

By Maya Asadova

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Webster University
470 E Lockwood Ave, St. Louis, MO 63119, USA



Note From the Lead Author Maya Asadova

This International Security Report aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of Iran's influence in Tajikistan.

We hope that this report will serve as a valuable resource for policymakers, scholars, practitioners, and all those interested in understanding and addressing the complexities of contemporary conflicts.

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Introduction

Iran has long shown interest in Central Asia as well as the Caspian Sea nations. It wants to create an economic environment stable enough for it to survive the US punishments, as well as generally a stable Central Asia is good for Iran. Iran has the potential to be an important actor in the future because of its geographical location, size, military, and mineral resource expertise in the Caspian Sea. But it is just that, a 'potential'. Iran has some influence in the region, but it is not significant at first glance as Central Asian republics did not appear to be taking Iran seriously, I argue that it is, as it is a shaping operation for Iran's dreams of larger influence in the region. Iran's strongest influence is in Tajikistan, and that is the subject of this paper. In the early 90's, Iran was the first country to open its embassy in the newly independent Republic of Tajikistan. Although both countries had a few setbacks in their relations along the way, i.e. Tajikistan blaming Iran for its civil war or the religious disagreements between the two, we still could see a positive relationship between them. It is easy to look at the history of the two and notice that Iran, even when rejected by Tajikistan, still extends an olive branch. Some scholars argue it is because of their shared culture, but I argue it is contributing to that "culture-building" operation. It is important to think about the long term when looking at Iranian actions, or else we might just wake up to it when it may be too late. Looking at it from that perspective makes it easier to see the shaping operations taking place in hopes of more soft power in the region in the future.

Background and Geopolitical Context

"Persian" Identity Over "Muslim" Identity

Iran has been known to use proxies to exert its power around the world. It is mostly known for its Shiite proxies and an intense regime with the goal of being an influential power in the Muslim world. However, when it comes to Central Asia, Iran has been leaning into its Persian identity more. As a lot of scholars have noticed, Iran's posturing in Central Asia has no ideological influences. "In contrast to the Middle East, Iranian cultural diplomacy in Tajikistan prioritizes a Persian identity as the basis for economic, scientific, cultural, and political integration in the region. Moreover, this identity is being discursively securitized as a strategic asset and an answer to threats from Salafism and globalization" (Anderson, 2019). Whenever the topic of religion does come up, Iran seems to have a narrative of "Islamic" unity rather than "Shiite" unity (Peyrouse and Ibraimov, 2010). It is important to point out that Iran is not flip-flopping on its posturing because of a lack of backbone, but rather as a technique to appeal to a wider range of groups (Anderson, 2019). While it is a bit of a challenge for Iran to strengthen its cultural ties with Central Asian Turkic countries, it is making a bit of progress in Tajikistan. It is the only non-Turkic republic in Central Asia and happens to be fairly similar to Iran culturally and linguistically. Tajikistan and Afghanistan historically were a part of Persia, and the Tajik language is actually derived from Persian, making it very similar to Iranian. Other Central Asian republics celebrate Navruz, the Persian New Year, but are more connected to Turkey or Russia,



unlike Tajikistan. Iran has taken that cultural similarity and exploited it to the fullest, providing itself a pathway to assert soft power. If Iran can gain influence in Tajikistan, it would provide an entry point for Iran to begin shaping operations in the other Central Asian republics.

From History to Modern Times

Over the course of history, Iran and Tajikistan were connected by both trade and conquest. Because of this, both countries share a lot in common from speaking variants of New Persian to celebrating Persian holidays (Anderson, 2019). Lukas Anderson summarizes the decline in relations between the countries really well; “Cultural and economic relations between the two regions declined when the territory of Tajikistan was incorporated into the Emirate of Bukhara in the late 18th century. The disconnection deepened following the Tsarist and then Soviet conquests of Central Asia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries” (Anderson, 2019). However, despite this common Persian identity revival, the countries don’t follow the same denomination of Islam. Iran is officially following Twelver Shiism while Tajikistan follows Sunni Hanafism. This does not matter as much since Iran focuses more on its Persian identity in Central Asia during diplomacy as opposed to its Shia identity focus when dealing with the Middle East. I believe that it is because Central Asia does not have too significant of a Shia population to be mobilized and achieve great objectives, as well as the fact that the Central Asian republics are mostly wary of any religious affiliation with politics, due to their own history in the 1990s. Under the Soviet Union, the communist government attempted to suppress religion, including in Central Asia. However, it was a lot harder to achieve this than in the western part of the union (Chausovsky and Mach, 2024). After the collapse of the USSR, religious restrictions were decreased which led to religious fundamentalism and extremism rising. Central Asia adopted Islam as a part of their culture in the 90’s following the collapse of the Union. But in the early 2000s, the leftover communist leadership began to clash with the rising religious extremists. Religious extremists were persecuted and jailed. A small degree of Islamic revival has occurred, but more as a cultural identity than a religious identity. However, the threat that Islamic extremism created there has had a lasting effect on the minds of the political leadership in the region (Chausovsky and Mach, 2024). Whenever Iran invokes any religiosity, it backtracks on its efforts in the region. An example would be how all its progress with Tajikistan was lost when Iran invited the leader of the Islamic Renaissance Party to visit just as the party was deemed a terrorist organization (Karimi and Osuli Odlu, 2023). Another example would be the Iran-Tajik textbooks, whenever there was a disagreement over how to represent girls, the collaboration would go cold (Anderson, 2019).

Russia and China

The Central Asian Republics have been considered Russia’s backyard for a very long time, pretty much until recently. Up until the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Central Asian Republics have been dependent on Russia for trade, and job opportunities for migrants (ie from Tajikistan), and supported Russia diplomatically, as well as their membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). However, since the war started Central Asian trucks were turned at European borders if they have crossed through Russia. Trade blocks hit hard, leaving the



republics searching for other options (Turner, 2022). Russia's influence may have been hindered by the war, nevertheless, it is still one of the major players in the geopolitical game in that region. China is another major player, and it has been ramping up its influence gradually over the last decade. China conducted multiple projects in the region, especially in Tajikistan. China also invests millions of dollars into the country every year, building roads, tunnels, and other infrastructure. Aside from trade and trade-related projects, China is not interested in contributing to the security of the region (Turner, 2022). However, if Russia used to offer security with its CSTO, China does not offer anything but its own benefit. Having Russia busy with Ukraine and China not interested in anything but its own trade (be it investing in its Belt and Road Initiative or the infrastructure of the countries that will be included in the route, of course, only for trade's sake), a power vacuum is created (Turner, 2022). That power vacuum may not be as concerning as it seems, since Central Asian states don't like to take sides and often are unpredictable making winning them over difficult. But in the case of Tajikistan, they are left to be the low-hanging fruit, being the poorest one of the five and having less of a developed culture. This is perfect grounds for Iran to start shaping the political environment to its favor, and given the shared language origins, history, and similar culture, Tajikistan is the perfect entry point.

Education as a Weapon of Soft Power

Educational Aid

Iran has used educational institutions to build a foundation for its influence in many ways since the early 90s, starting with alphabetical textbooks and ending with scholarships for Tajik students in Iran (Anderson, 2019). Iran also funded the openings of Institutions like the branch of the Khomeini Charitable Foundation and the Iranian Cultural Center, these institutions acquired legal status and had significant social roles (Shakir, 2023). Tajikistan is the poorest country in Central Asia; hence its educational system has been struggling. Not only that but also there isn't a strong sense of Tajik identity as the region was ruled by foreigners for most of its recent history (Mitran, Ilie Iulian. 2018). Iran has published alphabetical books jointly with Tajikistan that promoted the Persian alphabet rather than the Cyrillic one. The alphabet textbooks were combined with training for teachers, and speeches to promote the "ancestral language" (Anderson, 2019). Iran has also offered and given scholarships to Tajik students to continue their education in Iran. Though the students found it difficult to find a job in Tajikistan after their graduation, nonetheless the student flow persists (Peyrouse and Ibraimov, 2010). The education provided and promoted by Iran in Tajikistan focuses on promoting the idea of shared culture, shared language, and shared history. It is aimed to mirror the Turkey-Azerbaijan relations, i.e. the saying "one nation, two states".

The "Trojan Horse"

However, religion remains a big obstacle when it comes to Tajikistan. As Tajikistan remains secular after the USSR and having had their own civil war and political Islamist groups, now deemed as terrorist groups, religion sounds like "he who shall not be named" when it comes to



politics (Just like the rest of Central Asian republics). This conflict is seen in books (Anderson, 2019), the media that Iran attempted at establishing (Karimi and Osuli Odlu, 2023), and those same scholarships mentioned prior. The conflict often arises when it comes to the portrayal of women and girls, should they be covered or not. Iran would say yes but Tajikistan says no, and this creates tensions. Culture diplomacy is seen as a “Trojan horse” by some Tajik scholars (Karimi and Osuli Odlu, 2023), and they are not wrong since religion is a central piece of the Iranian identity (Karimi and Osuli Odlu, 2023). Religion is even present in their Foreign Policy and has been even with changes in administration. In Anderson's research, he mentions that some Iranian diplomats call these efforts “culture-building” rather than “shared culture”. “Iran established cultural centers to sponsor its beliefs and ideology like “Iranian” in the city of Khujand that- before it was closed- handled the distribution of books, holding cultural contests, providing internet services for people, and arranging youth visits to Iran” (Shakir, 2023). Iran needed a new way to assert soft power since religion is not an option with Central Asian states. Tajikistan speaks a similar language and happens to be unclear on its identity and poverty is crushing its educational system (Mitrani, Ilie Iulian. 2018). Iran is not educating Tajiks on their “ancestral heritage”, it is constructing it.

Looking Broader

One more thing that is important to point out here, is the significance of the Tajik diaspora, especially in Uzbekistan. This may seem a bit random, but Iran has always seen interest in Uzbekistan, but that interest was not reciprocated for most of the recent history. Tajiks are the largest minority in Uzbekistan, and getting through to them, be it from the “Persian” identity, Pan-Iranianism, or just purely from language assimilation, would unlock access to the biggest minority in one of the most powerful republics in Central Asia. Uzbekistan has a very real fear of the Tajik minority attempting to separate Bukhara and Samarkand from the rest of Uzbekistan (Moldaliyeva and Kilybayeva, 2024), as those cities are mostly populated with the Tajik diaspora, which is estimated to be 1.5 million to 9 million people in Uzbekistan as a whole (Turner, 2022).

Economic Interest

Trade and Investments

Due to the lack of dependence of Tajikistan on the U.S., the sanctions do not affect Iranian-Tajik trade relations (Karimi and Osuli Odlu, 2023). According to Dr. Shakir, 80% of Iranian exports to Tajikistan are not oil or energy, but rather more miscellaneous items (Shakir, 2017). However, due to its religious affiliation Iran's economic progress has been very limited, but it never ceases to continue trying to make more progress. This creates a constant push and pull that we could see play out over the last two decades as Tajikistan needs foreign investments and because of its lack of infrastructure it is unattractive to foreign investors, and Iran is willing to invest in Tajikistan and gain influence. However, then the push happens as Iran can't let go of its religious ideology and Tajikistan can't let go of its secularism and constant fear of political Islam. Nonetheless, Iranian investments continue. Those investments range from charities and



hospitals like the “Tajik-Iranian Red Crescents” joint hospital in Dushanbe (Karimi and Osuli Odlu, 2023), to bigger projects like tunnels, hydroelectric plants, direct flights to Tehran and plans to make a railroad for trade (Shakir, 2017). Last year, the President of Tajikistan stated that they are welcoming Iranian investors and collaboration in both the transportation sector, as well as the energy sector. “Tajikistan expresses its interest in attracting Iran's investments in free economic zones in the country and implementing joint projects beneficial for the parties, Tajik President Emomali Rahmon said... the effective use of the transport and transit capacity of the two countries for shipping goods and products, enhancing trade and economic cooperation, in general, was recognized as profitable, he said” (Interfax, 2023). In 2020, Iran was the second largest investor in Tajikistan. “Iran, the second largest investor in the country, sees the small Central Asian nation as a way to raise revenue while under increasingly intense U.S. sanctions” (Cohen and Grant, 2020). And in September of 2021, Iranian President Said Ibrahim Raisi officially visited Tajikistan. During his visit, the countries discussed and agreed to long-term trade cooperation (Schensnovich, 2023).

Looking Abroad

Tajikistan is landlocked and needs access to the sea as well as new trade routes and Iran can provide just that. There was planning to create a Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Iran route, however, things got complicated due to the Taliban coming to power in 2021 (Schensnovich, 2023). It is in Tajik interests to solve the Afghan problem and move on with the trade route, and it is also in Iranian interest to do so too, and perhaps get back to building the Tehran-Kabul- Dushanbe axis to counterbalance the Turkish influence (Schensnovich, 2023). While more significant projects like this trade route are on hold, Iran does not make significant economic gains from Tajikistan, for now. Central Asian states have previously shown interest in a trade route through Iran, and with the current conditions as well as one of the republics’ trusts (Tajikistan), perhaps that project could mean more than just Persian trade unity. However, economic interest in this potential, although important, is not as important as the soft power that could come with it.

Conclusion

All of Iran’s hard work in Central Asia, although it was a rocky ride, is starting to pay off. Iran was officially accepted as a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) with Kazakhstan’s support in 2023 (Moldaliyeva and Kilybayeva, 2024). Iran has also bettered its relationship with some Central Asian republics, and now with the republics seeking new trade routes, they are finally interested in what Iran has to offer (Moldaliyeva and Kilybayeva, 2024). When it comes to Tajikistan, Iran’s influence is growing. “Tajikistan is the only country in Central Asia where pan-Iranian sentiments can be expressed, where Iran is seen by some as a model, and where Shiite leaders make public their worries about the rise of Salafist groups” (Peyrouse and Ibrahimov, 2010). At the end of the day, Iran does not appear to seek to destabilize its neighbors, as a stable Central Asia is in Iran’s interest. A stable Central Asia means broader economic opportunities despite sanctions, it means a potential to fill the power vacuum and fulfill the Iranian dream of countering the U.S. hegemony, it could also simply mean a steady



and secure environment. “As a contiguous state with shared ethnic minorities, Iran has the most to lose if domestic instability should cause the implosion of Central Asia. But it also has the least ability to shape those events” (Sahoo, 2014). It only makes sense for Iran to try and shape the groundwork for its influence in Central Asia, and that’s why they have continued to do so even when their religious foreign policy has set them back a few steps.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maya Asadova is a Don Maland Researcher in International Conflict Analysis and Resolution, Middle East and Central Asia. Maya is a graduate student in National Security Studies. She graduated in May 2024 with a BA in International Relations and Media Studies. At the lab, Asadova will focus on the Central Asia area in her research.





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The current Director of the Lab is Professor Dani Belo, PhD

