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## Iran and Central Asia: Chances or Challenges?

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**Abstract:** The fall of Soviet Union and independence of republics of central Asia as well as South Caucasus have brought both chances and challenges for Iran. At first it seemed that Muslim republics, which broke from Soviet Union, might have brought great chances for Iran to promote her ideological claims and economic interests. Dreams of Islamic revolution in new independent central Asian republics invoked Iran, so much that it worried USA. In this article it is argued that Iran's challenge outweighs its chances.

**Keywords:** Islamic revivalism, Ethnic conflicts, Caspian delimitation, Regional dispute.

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### Introduction

The collapse of Soviet Union, has created for central Asian states new destinies, while provided regional powers, Iran and Turkey, new changes as well as new challenges. With this changes, some observers envisaged changes for Islamic Republic of Iran to extend its political Influence, economic interests and security limits.

Iran has long-standing historical and cultural ties with people of this region, and Islam as a religion has a deep roots inside nations of this area. Many deemed that the failure of Soviet Union as stronghold of communist Ideology leads to search for an alternative ideology, which would not be other than that of radical Islam. They thought that this version of islam, indeed, would be a revolutionary and militants one, of same vein that triggered Islamic revolution in iran and made a legal structure for a state called Islamic Republic. Then Islamic Republic of Iran would have a chance to save itself from isolation that was imposed upon it by western powers, especially the

US. This condition was also supposed to open new horizons for Iran in the economic realm. In sum, it seemed that Iran, given its exclusive cultural links with the region, as well as its geostrategic and geoeconomic situation, could enjoy resplendent changes.

### Political Islam, Does It Produce any Opportunity for I.R.I?

Some years prior to the Soviet Union breakdown, Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of Islamic Republic of Iran, through a Letter to Gorbachev, the leader of the Soviet Union, while foreseeing coming breakdown of the Soviet Union, suggested that Islam could replace the failed communism ideology (Herzig, 2003: 223-288). When the breakdown occurred, some observers suggested that the Islamic revolution of Iran would inspire similar revolutions in central Asia and South Caucasus. Some analysts looked for incidents that Islamic regime of Iran would involve itself in this or that Islamic movement of

the region (Hunter, 1992: 106). But both historical trend and Iranian policy turned to be different from this assessments and expectations.

In Southern republics of the Soviet Union, Islam had a contradictory status. On the one hand, it had along connection with ethnicity and language, a renowned place in nationality and identity as well as territorial bordering, and on the other hand it had to give way to an internationalist and communistic ideals. Stalin's ideas on nationalism and internationalism demanded a two layered identification for republic members of the Soviet Union: one which related to nationality, and the other related to Soviet Union citizenship and its ideals. This was supposed to make southern republics of the Soviet Union a source of inspiration for nationalist and communist movements of the Muslim people of the east.

This approach required a special form of Islam. So in Muslim republics, the official protected form of Islam took a path different from popular Islam of the mass. In everyday life, people followed a popular form of Islam which had been heavily mingled with local and tribal traditions. Now this Islam is experiencing an intricate turmoil and is a source of political activism, either in form of revolutionary movements or reactionary tendencies. It was this revitalism which some deemed to invoke Islamic revolution and create a new area of influence for Iran (Johnston, 2007, 6)

But this simplistic supposition did not come true. One reason was that the Sunni Islam in central Asia and in South Caucasus differs from shiite Islam in Iran. Political islam and Islamic activism in this region have their main manifestations in Vahhabism. Revitalism with such tendency advocates the idea of return to traditional, Canonical Islam which was practiced in the Middle East, where Islam appeared centuries ago. Islam entered Central Asia and South Caucasus in the form of mysticism which differs from the Canonical Islam (Walker, 2003).

Aside from this reality, Iran could not take risks trying to "export" its revolution to countries of central Asia and South Caucasus for the sake of some more vital security considerations. In the first place, any radical Islamic movement in this region would aggravate disorders and disabilities in which Iran would be the main loser. Disorders being nothing except more involvement of the world powers, especially the United States, Whose hostility toward Islamic republic of Iran is main predicament of latter in this region.

In the Second place, Islamic republic of Iran could not afford provoking Islamic radical movements at the cost of its good relations with Russia. As it will be explained, Iran needs Russian support in many international disputes and regional rivalries whereas, Russia doesn't tolerate any radical Islamic movement in the region. Russia labels all various Islamic movements as "vahhabiat" which Russian officials, as well as ruling elites of the region, denigate as ultra-conservatism (Abu-Rabi, 2003).

### **Disputes and Disturbances**

The Soviet Union legacies for Central Asia and South Caucasus were contradictory. The Soviet Union, on the one hand, made a number of new republics with new identities, and on the other hand, it drew a demarcation between them so reckless that left disputes among these republics after their independence. Some argue that line of demarcation was a policy of "divide and rule" (Johnston, 2007)

No matter who was liable about present disputes In the region, however, various disputes on territory, water, ethnicity and so on, divided sovereignty of this region. These disputes both prevent these states from uniting and do all their endeavors to achieve economic development as well as public prosperity (Spigle, 2010). These issues in response induced them to look for non-regional powers to resolve their regional problems. Nothing threatens Iran's security

ambitions more than influence and presence of western powers in its neighboring areas. For example, Karabakh's war between Azerbaijan and Armenia created complicated troubles for Iran. Iran has a major Azeri minority who expected Islamic government to help Azaris and Moslem cause in Karabakh. Moreover, Azerbaijan belongs to non-alignments in the region that stands opposite to a rival alignment to which Iran belongs. Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey coalesce around axis that aims at checking Russian hegemonic power in the region. In such regional alignment, Iran stands beside Russia and Armenia. Iran's close ties with Russia is surely understandable. The U.S attempts to isolate Iran, create serious problems for Iran with respect to its needs to participate in the world economy (Cornell, 2001). There is a kind of alignment between Russia and Armenia in centre, with Belarus at north and Iran and Syria in the southern peripheries of this alignment (Jameston Monitors, 1997).

It is claimed that in the heat of battle between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Iran was main corridor linking Armenia to the outer world in a critical situation. Containment of this country by Turkey (as the ally of Azerbaijan) and difficulty to access Russia (because of tension between Georgia and Russia) made Iran a main gate to the outer world. In this period, Iran and Armenian trade grew rapidly and Iran met some essential Armenian needs as electricity and gas (Haliday, 1996: 75).

Despite its deep links with Azerbaijan, Iran has directed its strategic relation toward Armenia and Russia. And this is not easy task for a country that has some twenty million Azeri and claims defending Moslem cause in the entire world. This fact refutes the common belief that Islamic republic of Iran follows a rigid ideological foreign policy. In general in Central Asia and south Caucasus, Iran follows a realistic policy, while reacting to complicated conditions.

One point of discord between Iran and Azerbaijan relates to Azerbaijan's good relation with the U.S. and Israel. In 1995 after rejection of Iran's proposal for having a share in a concertium for exploitation and exportation of oil, Azerbaijan was warned by Iran of having a close ties with Israel (O.M.R.I daily Digest, 1995: 10 May). However, in Karabakh's war when Armenian victorious army was advancing towards Nakhchivan, Iran was forced to warn Armenia to stop advancing.

### **Be Alone in Caspian Troubles**

Although one of the main slogans of Islamic Revolution was, and officially supported, is "not west, not east" (meaning not the U.S not the Soviet Union), what Soviet Union demise has left as heritage, for Iran, was more troubles than ease. One of these troubles is delimitation of Caspian sea. While in Tsarist Russia according to two treaties between Russia and Iran in 1813 and 1828 Iran was deprived of any rights in Caspian Sea except commercial activities, Communist Russia abolished all Russian privileges and granted Iran equal right according to treaties of 1921, 1935 and 1940. So the states of Soviet Union and Iran shared all the sea in common. However, following the breakdown of Soviet Union and independence of Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan Caspian littoral states grow to five.

Soon after the dissolution of Soviet Union each of the five littoral states around Caspian Sea demanded its share to exploit energy reserve of sea bed as a territorial right. To exploit rich reserve of energy of sea bed derived states to determine and strive to maximize their share in Caspian Sea. Given the complicated condition of the Caspian that simultaneously could be considered both land and sea, as well as unlevelled distribution of the reserves in territorial shores, disagreements were vigorous as the controversy last. For some years, Iran and Russia had common positions, as energy reserves in their respective

sections of sea are not so rich as other littoral states.

So for some years, Russia and Iran were opposed to sectoral division of Caspian Sea (Dekmejian and Simonian, 2003: 23). And in this respects both states opposed other littoral states. However, Russia recently has withdrawn its previous positions. In 1998, Russia and Kazakhstan agreed to divide northern part of Caspian Sea along its energy reserves on the basis of national division (Syovitz, 1998). In July 2000, Russia envoied unspecialized emissary to other parties and officially informed them of its new position on delimitation of Caspian Sea. Since Russia too specified to divide sea bed into national sectors, Iran is left alone with a position which has not any promising perspective.

### **Regional and Non-Regional Powers**

Following the Soviet Union breakdown, two new regional powers were added to Russia as regional players in the region, while emerged new condition for presence of new non regional powers. Hence, the Central Asia and South Caucasus witnessed presence of three regional powers. Each of these powers has certain interests to and grounds for participation in regional politics. Moreover, China with its Sin Kian province of Muslim inhabitant is not far from being a regional power in this region. However Iran, Russia and Turkey are definite powers of this region. From first days of the Soviet Union dissolution, some analysts began to question what fate await the states of this region; which course will be likely to follow? Which of regional powers would have more effect on emerging states? Each of mentioned powers has certain potentials to affect political and economic currents of the region. Iran has a deep cultural kinship with the people of the region, Russia has played an important role in recent history and destiny of the region and hence has affected modern courses of life of these nations. Turkey

has close ethnic and cultural ties with nations of central Asia and south Caucasus.

Russia and Turkey each possess certain influences among power elites of mentioned states. Some of these elites look to Russia and some to Turkey as sources of inspiration and support, while Iran supposedly might inspire revolutionary and radical nationalistic currents inside societies. There are various areas in which these powers compete and cooperate with each other. Member of CIS other than Russia have certain interests to control hegemonic status of Russia. So do wish Iran and Turkey, which in their turn are not pleased with Russian hegemony in the region. But this fact was not any good to Iran, because Iran's stance against "international dominance order" imposes costs on its potential allies that central Asian and south Caucasus nations do not want to pay. Alliance with Iran has more cost than gain. In this case, Turkey, with its good relations with western powers has better conditions. Iran and Russia have a common interest to oppose non-regional powers presence in the region, therefore Turkey as member of NATO is suspected by those two powers of bridging NATO way to the region. However, at the same time, Iran has some common interests with Turkey to control Russian hegemonic standing, so Iran in her diplomacy confronts with a complicated situation.

### **Rush of World Powers**

Rush of world powers towards central Asia and south Caucasus following the Soviet Union dissolution was not astonishing. This region is the central part of Eurasia and one of the most strategic parts of the world. Powers such as Russia, China, European Community and India border there. This region has one of the richest world energy reserves. All of these, as a rule, must be unique strategic assets for Iran. However, this is not so. The increasing presence of the U.S

in this region threatens Iran's interests in many areas.

Up 1990, the United States involvement in the region was not remarkable. The 11 September 2001 incident and the Persian Gulf War, as well as growing Islamic movements in Middle East motivated United States to involve more and more in this region (Amir Ahmadian, 2004: 38-60). The United States plan for this region covers three phase: in the short phase, to maintain plural setting of the region, in the middle term, to establish U.S. leadership in the region, and at long term, to ensure its dominant position in the Central Asia and South Caucasus. To have dominance on the Eurasia with major powers such as China, Russia and India is of vital importance for United States (Erico, 2003: 218-228).

An important part of this strategy proceeds in the framework of NATO expansion. NATO which was founded as a means to confront the Soviet Union, not only continued its ventures after the Soviet breakup, but also intensified its activity and expanded its ambitions. One of the plans that NATO proceeded at earlier stages of its activity in this region, was a plan named NATO Partnership for Peace which was received warmly by states of the region. These states considered it as a means to balance Russian powers in the CIS (Community of Independent States). Main goals of partnership for peace is to tie security problems of Central Asia and South Caucasian states to European security plans and promote stability of the region in the line of western powers interests. Russia like Iran reacted negatively to it and some Russian diplomats described it as a mechanism for penetration of western imperialism into Eastern Europe, Trans-Caucasus and Central Asia.

Central Asian and South Caucasus States, in their turns, need to check Russian hegemony in the region and modernize their armament equipment which yet is not modernized due to their dependence on Russian army. Weak

economic situation induces these states to maintain their security by balancing Russian regional power with NATO international powers.

Of course, another way to overcome these difficulties is to develop some regional cooperation structures. However, as it was said, vast areas of dispute divides the state of central Assia and south Caucasus and hinder solidarity in this region. Some years ago, Iran tried to introduce a regional cooperation plan which aimed at creation of a kind of security structure. But this attempt did not have any success. The Organization of Economic Cooperation (ECO), which originally was founded by Iran, Turkey and Pakistan, and extended its membership to ten to cover some central Asia and South Caucasus, is not very successful. ECO with a population over 350 million expected to become an important economic organization. However, in spite of Iran's efforts and emphasis of various heads of these states in several sessions, it has low performance. As an example, trade among members of the organization is some 5 to 7 percent of their total foreign trades. This is very low if we compare it with ACAN which trades among its members amounts to 20 to 30 percent of their total foreign trade and that of E.U which exceeds 65 percent (Rasouly, 2007).

The main security structure in the region is Shanghai treaty which initiated by China in 2001. Russia, China, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan are the main members. The Shanghai Treaty is a promising step towards a security structure that could play a part releasing these states from dependence on non-regional powers. But the same disputes which were mentioned earlier hinders the advancement of this course.

### **Conclusion**

The breakdown of Soviet Union and independence of the central Asian and south Caucasian states opened new horizons before

Iran to extend its influence towards northern countries. Iran's age-old cultural ties in the region and the perspective of Islamic revitalism supposed to introduce potentials to push back the wall of containment which U.S has imposed on Iran. But problems such as disputes that separate nations of the region from each other, calls for non-regional powers to involve themselves in the region. This fact brings Iran more challenges than chances. Given increasing presence of the western powers in Central Asia and the Caspian, it is not easy to say whether the collapse of the Soviet Union lead to more gains for Iranian than costs.

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