

**The material and immaterial connectivity  
underpinning Iran–Central Eurasia relations:**

**Elite discourse in Baku and Tashkent**



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## Abstract

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the independence of the republics of the South Caucasus and Central Asia opened a window of geopolitical opportunity to the Islamic Republic of Iran. Like Turkey, Iran could henceforth start leveraging millennia-worth of ‘immaterial connectivity’: religious, linguistic, cultural and historical commonalities, hitherto impeded and obscured by decades of Soviet hegemony. Compared to Turkey, however, Iran has a clear advantage in terms of ‘material connectivity’, by virtue of directly bordering both sub-regions, as well as the Caspian Sea waterway. It has thus been able to court the bulk of its landlocked interlocutors with the promise of enabling access to international shipping routes via the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, as well as overland transport along east–west and north–south Eurasia-spanning axes respectively. With interlocutors such as Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, the latter has been done without much compounding complexity, largely in pursuit of pragmatic interests, especially once it became clear that Iran’s northern policy vector is an overwhelmingly-de-ideologized pragmatic one. By contrast, the two most complex constituent dyads of the Iran–Central Eurasia regional nexus—namely the Tehran–Baku and the Tehran–Tashkent relationship, which are both explored here and compared in an in-depth manner—have been experiencing particular volatility over the course of the past three decades. Applying the theoretical framework of constructivism and relying on the methodological tool of analysing all hegemonic national discourse where Iran is the common denominator—discourse relayed over the course of elite interviews in Baku and Tashkent in the 2021–2022 period—one can discern some overarching trends. Firstly, in addition to Tehran systematically deferring to Moscow on Eurasian matters, the two aforementioned relationships have operated as a function of the broader Tehran–Baku–Yerevan and Tehran–Tashkent–Dushanbe ‘relationship triangles’ respectively. Assumptions of the latter’s perennial nature are refuted by a key finding that the latter dynamic had been limited to the Karimov era in Uzbekistan and is no longer operational. Secondly, Iran’s conspicuous post-Cold War cultural redeployment, occurring against the backdrop of proliferating material links in the area transport infrastructure, has been challenging elements of Azerbaijan’s and Uzbekistan’s still-consolidating nationbuilding narratives. Particularly in the former—Shia-Muslim-majority—case, strong cultural and historical proximity to Iran and shared legacies of Persianate elite culture has shown to hinder the development of closer regional ties, rather than being conducive to it.

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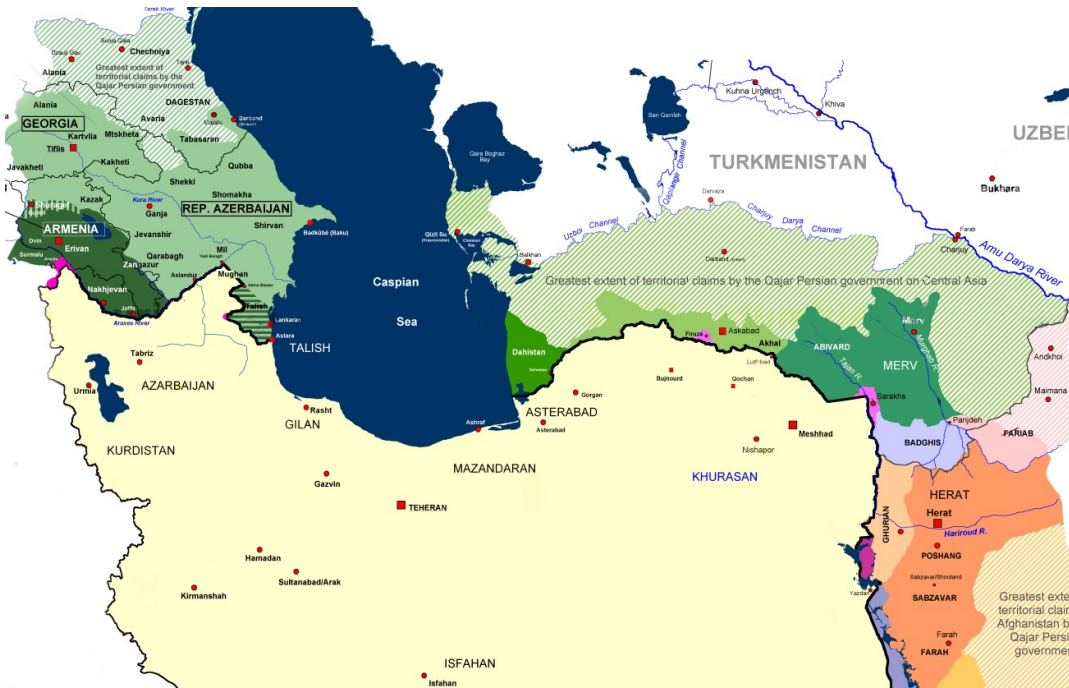


**Figure n.1:** Visualization of territorial losses of Qajar Iran to the Russian Empire overlaid with current-day political borders (in the case of Turkmen-inhabited territories, Qajar Iran's prior control had been rather 'theoretical')

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**The Turkmensahra:** Green – Lost to Russia by the Treaty of Atrek, 1869

**Khorasan:** Lighter green – Lost to Russia by the Treaty of Akhal, 1881 / Darker green – Lost to Russia by the Settlement of 1886

Based on the work by Izady, Michael. "Iran Territorial Changes since 1790s (detailed)". *Atlas of the Islamic World and Vicinity* (New York: Columbia Univ, 2006-present). URL: [gulf2000.columbia.edu/maps.shtml](http://gulf2000.columbia.edu/maps.shtml) (cropped and simplified by Jan Tomek for purposes of legibility)

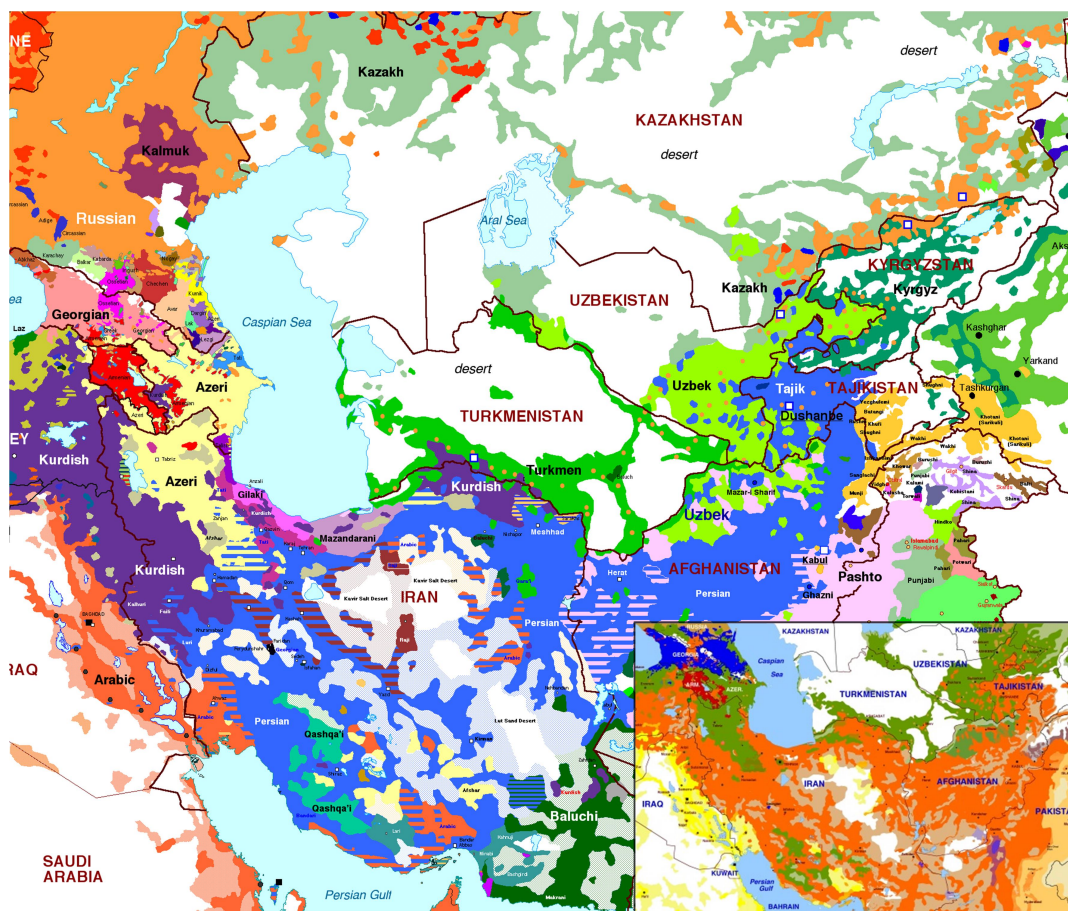


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Source: Izady, Michael. "Central Asia and Vicinity, Languages"; "Middle East Language Families". *Atlas of the Islamic World and Vicinity* (New York: Columbia Univ, 2006-present). URL: [gulf2000.columbia.edu/maps.shtml](http://gulf2000.columbia.edu/maps.shtml) (cropped by Jan Tomek)

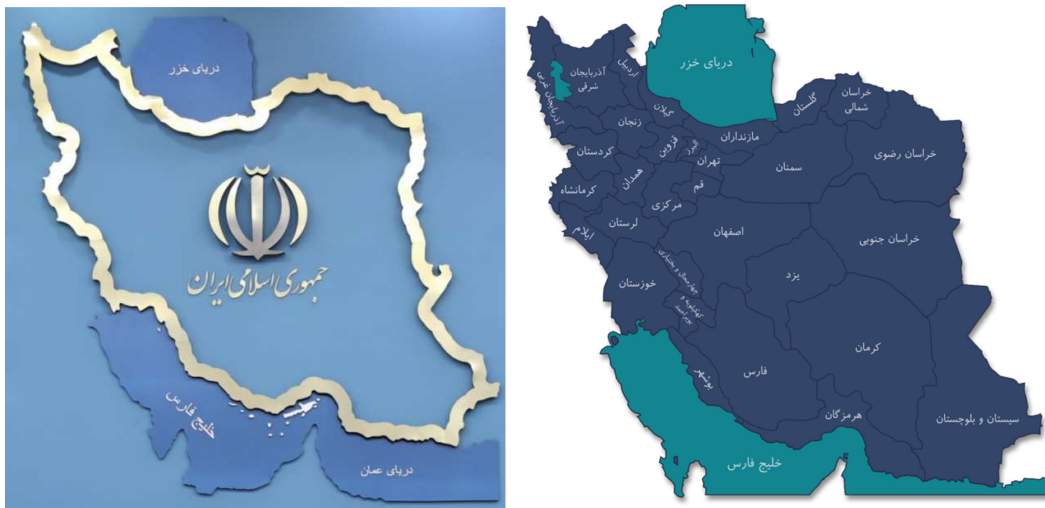


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Sources: “Jalase-ye Šowrā-ye ‘Ālī-ye Ešteḡāl” [A session of the Supreme Employment Council]. *Tasnīm*,

8 Farvardīn 1402/March 28, 2023. URL:

[www.tasnimnews.com/fa/media/1402/01/08/2872716/%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%87-%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%AA%D8%BA%D8%A7%D9%84](http://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/media/1402/01/08/2872716/%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%87-%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%AA%D8%BA%D8%A7%D9%84)

Salehi, Peyman. “SVG map of Iran”. *GitHub*, 2016. URL: [github.com/peymanslh/iranmap](https://github.com/peymanslh/iranmap)

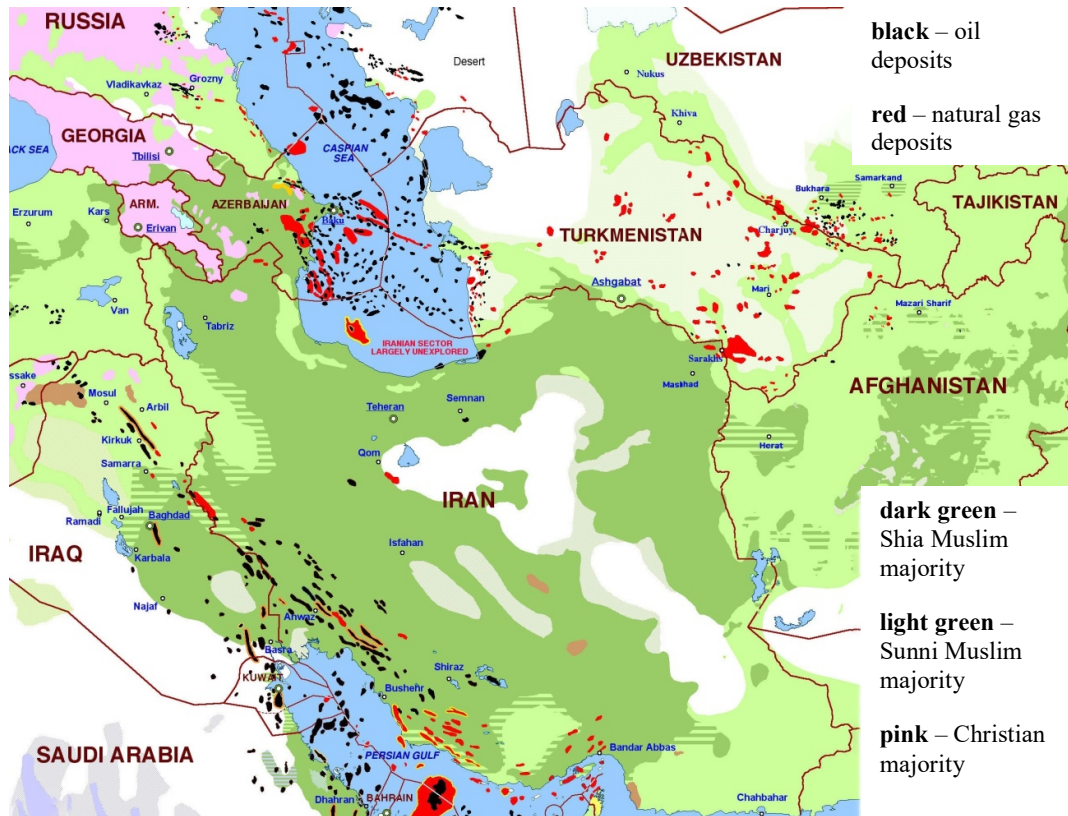


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Source: Izady, Michael. "Middle East Energy Deposits in the Context of its Religious Makeup". *Atlas of the Islamic World and Vicinity* (New York: Columbia Univ, 2006-present). URL: [gulf2000.columbia.edu/maps.shtml](http://gulf2000.columbia.edu/maps.shtml) (cropped and annotated by Jan Tomek)



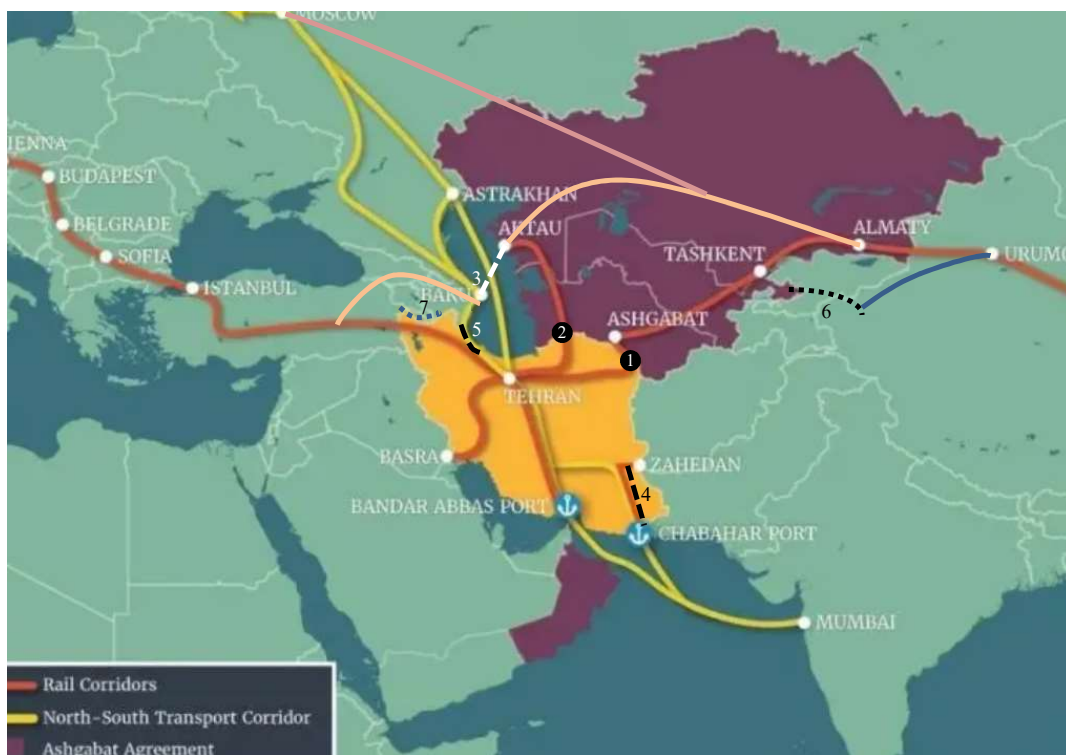


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- 6 – China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway link (in planning stage)
- 7 – Zangezur Corridor (in stage of political negotiations)

Source: Banning, Tim; Mani, Lukas. "Iran's Railway Ambitions". *ReconnectingAsia*, April 2, 2018.

URL: [reconasia.csis.org/irans-railway-ambitions/](https://reconasia.csis.org/irans-railway-ambitions/) (cropped, edited and annotated by Jan Tomek)

## **List of abbreviations**

**BRI** – Belt and Road Initiative

**CIS** – Commonwealth of Independent States

**EAEU** – The Eurasian Economic Union

**ECO** – The Economic Cooperation Organization

**GU(U)AM** – Organization for Democracy and Economic Development/Georgia, Ukraine, (Uzbekistan,) Azerbaijan, Moldova

**IDP** – internally-displaced person

**INSTC** – The International North–South Transport Corridor

**IR** – International Relations (academic discipline)

**IRGC** – Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps/‘The Revolutionary Guards’/‘The *Pāsdārān*’ (Iran)

**NIOC** – National Iranian Oil Company

**SCO** – The Shanghai Cooperation Organization

**WMD** – Weapon(s) of mass destruction

## Notes on transliteration

For the purposes of this dissertation, I decided to use an *ad-hoc*-yet-internally-consistent system of transliteration for Russian and Persian. This is in search of a compromise between, on the one hand, the most ‘technical’ scholarly transliteration standards and, on the other hand, the greatest-possible degree of intelligibility to a non-specialist familiar with either one of the two languages. An additional consideration is allowing the reader to carry out a ‘reverse transliteration’ of the titles and names cited by means of a simple ‘Ctrl+F’/‘replace’ function in a basic word-processor with relative ease.

Rather than using ‘i’ and ‘u’ for the short-close-vowel series of Classical Persian, phonemically contrasting with their long counterparts ‘ī’ and ‘ū’ respectively, I use ‘e’ and ‘o’ for the contemporary standard Iranian Persian mid-vowel reflexes of the former, all while conserving the length-indicating macrons for the latter vowel series. In doing so, I avoid possible ambiguity resulting from the occasional reference to Classical Persian renderings, as well as—much more importantly—to the eastern parts of the contemporary New Persian dialect continuum (namely Dari and Tajiki). In all Iran-specific contexts, my transliteration reflects the historical merger of ‘ē’ with ‘ī’ and of ‘ō’ with ‘ū’—to produce ‘ī’ and ‘ū’ respectively—a merger that did not occur in non-Iranian varieties (thereby preserving Classical/eastern renderings, such as *Kōh-i Nūr*).

For both Russian and Iranian Persian, I largely avoid digraphs, relying on letters with diacritics instead. In case of Persian, no digraphs are ever used. Only in the case of transliterating Russian, I resort to the ‘y+a/u’ digraph to indicate an iotated-vowel letter (any ‘y’ not immediately followed by a vowel, by contrast, indicates the close central unrounded vowel ‘ɯ’), as well as to the ligature ‘ts’ to indicate ‘ц’ (to avoid conflation

with the ‘t’+‘s’ cluster frequently appearing across morpheme boundaries). Use of letters that may be counterintuitive to non-specialists—such as ‘j’ (for vowel iotation and for ‘й’) and ‘c’ (for ‘ц’) in Russian, or of ‘x’ for ‘خ’ in Persian—is avoided.

### *Russian*

|                                              |              |              |               |               |
|----------------------------------------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|
| <b>а</b> – a                                 | <b>ѐ</b> – ě | <b>н</b> – n | <b>х</b> – h  | <b>э</b> – è  |
| <b>б</b> – b                                 | <b>ж</b> – ž | <b>о</b> – o | <b>ц</b> – ts | <b>ю</b> – yu |
| <b>в</b> – v                                 | <b>з</b> – z | <b>п</b> – p | <b>ч</b> – č  | <b>я</b> – ya |
| <b>г</b> – g                                 | <b>и</b> – i | <b>р</b> – r | <b>ш</b> – š  |               |
| <b>д</b> – d                                 | <b>й</b> – ĭ | <b>с</b> – s | <b>щ</b> – šč |               |
| <b>е</b> – ye (word-initially)/e (elsewhere) | <b>к</b> – k | <b>т</b> – t | <b>ъ</b> – ”  |               |
|                                              | <b>л</b> – l | <b>у</b> – u | <b>ы</b> – y  |               |
|                                              | <b>м</b> – m | <b>ф</b> – f | <b>ь</b> – ’  |               |

### *Iranian Persian*

|                    |              |              |                   |                     |
|--------------------|--------------|--------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| <b>ا</b> – a/e/o/ā | <b>خ</b> – ḫ | <b>ص</b> – ṣ | <b>ک</b> – k      | <b>ء/آ/او/ی</b> – ’ |
| <b>ب</b> – b       | <b>د</b> – d | <b>ض</b> – ž | <b>گ</b> – g      | <b>اَ</b> – a       |
| <b>پ</b> – p       | <b>ذ</b> – ḏ | <b>ط</b> – ṭ | <b>ل</b> – l      | <b>اُ</b> – o       |
| <b>ت</b> – t       | <b>ر</b> – r | <b>ظ</b> – ḏ | <b>م</b> – m      | <b>اِ</b> – e       |
| <b>ث</b> – ṯ       | <b>ز</b> – z | <b>ع</b> – ‘ | <b>ن</b> – n      | <b>اِ</b> – ā       |
| <b>ج</b> – j       | <b>ژ</b> – ž | <b>غ</b> – ġ | <b>و</b> – v/ū/ow |                     |
| <b>چ</b> – č       | <b>س</b> – s | <b>ف</b> – f | <b>ه</b> – h/-e   |                     |
| <b>ح</b> – ḥ       | <b>ش</b> – š | <b>ق</b> – q | <b>ی</b> – y/ī/ey |                     |



## Chapter 1: Introduction

The fall of Communism in Europe and elsewhere within the Soviet sphere of influence did not only usher in an era of geopolitical realignment and boundary-redrawing, but also a wave of inexorable reacquainting of neighbouring peoples—often linked by millennia of shared history—with one another. This was effectively a reversal of prior top-down decisions to seal off the Soviet border—and also that of the USSR’s satellites—from their ostensibly-free-market-capitalist neighbours—with some of the most evocative imagery being the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dismantling of the Iron Curtain more broadly.<sup>1</sup> At the present moment, more than three decades later, conventional regional subdivisions of Europe and Asia,<sup>2</sup> as commonly in use in academia and reflected by national and international agencies, seem to no longer hold up particularly well—not only in light of developments and politico-cultural realities that succeeded Moscow’s hegemony over much of Eurasia, but also to those predating said hegemony. This is in no small part due to the fact that the geographic categories still in use hearken back to an obsolete logic of Cold-War-era division of Europe and Asia. On occasion, a crude binary ‘east-west distinction’ is deployed to sort modern European states in ways that come across as counterintuitive, geographically-speaking. Greece ends up being ‘Western European’ while its neighbour Albania gets deemed a part of ‘Eastern Europe’. Austria is identified with ‘Western Europe’ while its formerly-Habsburg-ruled Cisleithanian territories known nowadays as Slovenia and the Czech Republic end up categorized as ‘Eastern Europe’. Finland is placed within ‘Western Europe’ while its ethnolinguistic ‘cousin’ Estonia—lying across the narrow Gulf of

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<sup>1</sup> The modern-day Korean Peninsula could arguably be deemed a hangover of this Cold War-era Eurasia-spanning historical divide.

<sup>2</sup> These may be overly broad (such as in the case of Eastern Europe) or overly narrow (such as in case of Central Asia), as is discussed later.

Finland—retains the label ‘Eastern Europe’. The Soviet Union casts a long shadow, so to speak, from ‘beyond the grave’.

Further afield, near the fuzzy boundary between Europe and Asia lies the Republic of Azerbaijan. For many practical purposes it is lumped together with countries such as Moldova and Belarus, and some dozen other independent states of the ‘former-Soviet space’. In terms of regional delineation, Azerbaijan is only rarely grouped together with its close historical, linguistically- and increasingly-geopolitically-relevant non-ex-Soviet neighbours of Turkey and Iran—a particularly ironic outcome given that the toponym ‘Azerbaijan’ referred exclusively to Iran’s northwest up to 1918.<sup>3</sup> This historical myopia affects pretty much the entire southern section of what used to comprise the Soviet Union, namely the South Caucasus and Central Asia (here for brevity referred to collectively as ‘Central Eurasia’<sup>4</sup>). More than three decades ago, these newly-independent republics effectively ‘rediscovered’ their affinity with the politics or sub-national regions on the other side of the former-Soviet border. From west to east, the modern-day states of Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and China share history, ethnolinguistic minorities, religious denominations and cultural traditions with the adjacent post-Soviet republics of Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Khorasan, a once discrete core region of the eastern realms of the Abbasid Caliphate—birthplace of New Persian and home to the cities of Nishapur, Merv and Herat—now straddles, at least in its most

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<sup>3</sup> Atabaki, Touraj. *Azerbaijan: Ethnicity and the Struggle for Power in Iran*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2000: 25.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Eurasia’ itself is an ambivalent term coinciding, in its most narrow definition, with the boundaries of the former-Soviet space. It has been nevertheless also subject to a heavily-ideological reconceptualization and conceptual expansion, most notably in Russia, with difficult-to-precisely-ascertain degrees of influence of the writings of political philosopher Aleksandr Dugin. By contrast, the understanding of ‘Eurasia’ and ‘Central Eurasia’ here is one of a purely-neutral descriptor.

narrow territorial delineation,<sup>5</sup> the modern-day borders of Iran, Turkmenistan and Afghanistan. On a much smaller scale, the Mughan plain, a well-defined ethno-cultural region is split between the contemporary Republic of Azerbaijan and Iran's Ardabil Province. The aforementioned contemporary—yet essentially still Cold War-based—subdivisions of Eurasia obfuscate these deeper historical and cultural legacies.

While analogous cases of sub-national and national affinity can be found in case of Turkey, Afghanistan, Pakistan and China (via Xinjiang) *vis-à-vis* their post-Soviet (almost-)neighbours, Iran still stands out *vis-à-vis* the former category. The Iranian Plateau is equally contiguous with the South Caucasus, as it is with Central Asia, with manifold implications on physical overland connectivity, both existing and prospective. While it would be worthwhile to explore *how all the aforementioned 'Northern Tier'*<sup>6</sup> *states have managed to leverage their deep 'civilizational' links with the 'Former Soviet South', and how these political, economic and cultural overtures are received in the former Soviet republics themselves,*<sup>7</sup> it is nonetheless Iran in particular—namely its post-Soviet-collapse-up-to-today experience with Central Eurasia—that is the focus of the present piece of research. For reasons that are further explored on the ensuing pages, this scholarly undertaking examines the nature of post-Soviet-collapse relations between Iran and Iran's immediate northern neighbourhood, not least the potential for considerable 'civilizational affinity' to work as an asset, as well as a liability to Tehran developing closer relations with polities of the region. This is notably explored in-depth in the cases of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Uzbekistan, which both

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<sup>5</sup> In its broad definition, 'Greater Khorasan' would also include parts of the modern-day territory of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan

<sup>6</sup> This dated concept refers to the generally-non-Arab states of the 'broader Middle East' allied with Washington for much of the Cold War: Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Pakistan. Here I repurpose it to refer specifically to Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

<sup>7</sup> It is useful to emphasize how, for lack of any territorial contiguity, Turkey benefits from linguistic affinity with the four out of the five post-Soviet Central Asian republics.

stand in the ‘sweet spot’ of—in addition to said close affinity—also sharing considerable transport links (and potential for new development thereof) and resulting logistical interdependence with the Islamic Republic.

Returning to the intersubjective ‘connective tissue’ of the broader region, an acknowledgement that the Christian-majority (and neither Turkic, nor Iranian<sup>8</sup>) South Caucasian states of Georgia and Armenia would tend to occupy a more ‘liminal space’ in any scholarly investigation that privileges linguistic, religious, and ‘Persianate-high-culture’<sup>9</sup> ties between countries and regions on both sides of the southern ex-Soviet border is in order. Furthermore, the Republic of Azerbaijan is more similar to its Central Asian ‘cousins’ than to neighbouring Georgia and Armenia, insofar as Azerbaijan’s national identity is largely a 20<sup>th</sup> century product of Moscow’s nationalities policy.<sup>10</sup> This may have a vast array of implications for *the inclusion (or exclusion) of non-ex-Soviet neighbours such as Iran in (or from) their national historiography and their nationbuilding narratives* (i.e. another recurring feature and motif of elite discourse). I would therefore argue that the most amenable South Caucasian case study to a comparative approach within South-Caucasus–Iran–Central-Asia relations is precisely the Republic of Azerbaijan. The utility of Georgia and Armenia is generally circumscribed here to the role the two have been playing in transregional connectivity

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<sup>8</sup> outside the Azerbaijani-speaking minority in Eastern Georgia, the Kurdish and the Meskhetian Turkish diasporas, the Eastern-Iranian-speaking breakaway polity of South Ossetia and the Kurdish-speaking ethnoreligious Yezidi minority of Armenia. Armenians themselves were once believed by linguists to speak an Iranian language, this error being attributable to the extensive influence Parthian had on Armenian during the period of Arsacid rule in late antiquity.

<sup>9</sup> The adjective ‘Persianate’, coined by Marshall Hodgson, refers to a transnational Persian-language-based elite culture predominating in much of the eastern half of the Islamic world, from the Middle Ages up to the early modern period.

<sup>10</sup> The six Caspian-Central Asian nations, for instance, lack a stable historical ethnonym, and a straightforward premodern ‘antecedent’ of statehood that could be easily mapped onto a given contemporary post-Soviet republic.

See Harun Yilmaz’s research on early-20<sup>th</sup> century Soviet debates on Soviet-Azerbaijani identity.

projects, in broader Iran–South Caucasus relations, or—in case of the latter majority-Christian republic—as part of the ‘Tehran–Baku–Yerevan’ triad.

Islam, as a set of religious precepts and axioms of belief, does not necessarily have to be deeply examined here to show just how important of a role has Iran and the mediaeval New Persian language played in ‘mediating’ the Islamic worldview for the Turkic world and for the Indian Subcontinent.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the political culture of the aforementioned portion of Eurasia had been faceted by a symbiosis of Persian ‘high culture’ of the royal court and of state bureaucracy with the Turco-Mongol martial and dynastic culture. The historical divide, within Central Asia (i.e. ‘Russian’ and ‘Chinese Turkestan’), between the sedentary Sarts and Taranchis and the nomadic, ‘comparatively-more-lightly-Islamized’ and ‘lightly-impacted-by-Persianate-culture’ Kipchaks and the Turkmen maintained its downstream effects. The shared cultural capital<sup>12</sup> upon which Tehran can build with interacting with political interlocutors from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan—and under less grim circumstances also with the Uyghur—is consequently much more substantial than that shared with the more heavily-Sovietized Kazakhs and the Kyrgyz, or—albeit to a lesser extent—with the staunchly isolationist political representation of Turkmenistan. In stark contrast to the latter dynamic, such local discrepancies in shared cultural capital are largely absent in case of modern Turkey’s engagement with post-Soviet Central Asia. Furthermore, Turkey’s still-more-or-less-secular political model and its Westernized elite continue to be more

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<sup>11</sup> Persian terms—rather than Quranic ones adopted from Arabic—are used when referring to many Islamic concepts such as ‘sin’, ‘ritual ablution’, ‘the practice of fasting’ and ‘obligatory prayer’ by the Muslims of South Asia, Central Eurasia, Anatolia, the Balkans and the Volga-Ural region of Russia.

<sup>12</sup> By using the term ‘cultural capital’, coined by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, I adapt the latter’s assertion that shared intersubjective outcomes of socialization—Bourdieu focusing primarily on class signifiers—can bestow social benefits not unlike financial capital on individuals or groups. I extrapolate the latter for the context of the current-day vestiges of the Persianate elite culture that once permeated large swathes of Eurasia.

appealing to the nominally-Muslim post-Soviet elite.<sup>13</sup> Last, but not least—unlike Iran’s weak financial capacities—Turkey’s economic engagement in Central Eurasia has never been hindered by an international sanctions regime.

The areas where most progress has been made over the course of the past three decades in the development of bilateral and multilateral relations between the ‘Northern Tier’ states of the Middle East and post-Soviet Central Eurasia was in terms of increasing—if not at times outright ‘setting up from scratch’—overland physical (i.e. material) connectivity.<sup>14</sup> As a clear dividend of Iran’s previously-hinted-at singular geographic location at the intersection of prospective large-scale Eurasia-spanning north–south and east–west transport corridors, Tehran here has kept a major comparative advantage over Ankara. This connectivity and early inklings of economic interdependence thrust Iran onto the ‘conceptual radar’ of members of the South Caucasian and Central Asian political, business and academic elite. Burgeoning physical connectivity and resulting more-frequent interactions bring more of the aforementioned pre-existing ‘immaterial connectivity’ to light. This includes not only a shared cultural capital that enables a reliance on a common intersubjectivity in various domains, but also the physical manifestation of said connectivity, be it their still-standing architectural testaments in the centres of ancient cities on the Silk Road, or eye-catching yearly celebrations of Nauruz. For these reasons, Iran’s relations with the

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<sup>13</sup> Pahlavi, Pierre; Hojati, Afshin. “Iran and Central Asia: The Smart Politics of Prudent Pragmatism” in Kavalski, Emilian (Ed.) *The New Central Asia: The Regional Impact of International Actors*. World Scientific Publishing Company, 2010: 235

<sup>14</sup> It needs to be emphasized that the newly-independent republics inherited a Soviet-era rail, road and pipeline network wholly centred on Moscow and on the European demographic and industrial core of the Soviet Union more broadly.

Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Uzbekistan<sup>15</sup> are the most prominent instances of a rich ongoing dialectic between material and immaterial connectivity.

Admittedly none of these republics currently have Iran among their top trading partners, those spots being generally reserved to the EU, Russia and China. If one were to base the choice of specific country-case studies for the exploration of bilateral and multilateral relations between Iran and republics of the former Soviet space purely on macroeconomic indicators,<sup>16</sup> then the Islamic Republic's relations with Russia would take centre stage, followed by those with Ukraine and the South Caucasus, with Central Asia being 'more of an afterthought'.<sup>17</sup> Yet even within Central Eurasia, it is Armenia and Turkmenistan, two among the post-Soviet republics for which post-independence trade with Iran has represented anything remotely substantial, who engage in pragmatic politico-economic considerations with little conceptual space available—or indeed desired—for notions of 'civilizational affinity'.<sup>18</sup> These two regional dyads—alongside the Tehran–Astana relationship—are largely bereft of any productive material–immaterial-connectivity dialectic. They can thus be deemed too 'pedestrian' and 'straightforward' in their dynamic (and thus not wholly unlike Iran's bilateral relations with, for instance, Russia or China)—in ways that are being further explored here—to warrant an in-depth case study reliant on intersubjectivity. Together with the practical consideration of feasibility of fieldwork—which ruled out Persian-speaking Tajikistan over the course of the 2019-2023 period—the two case studies receiving

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<sup>15</sup> Tajikistan is a close contender, but is at a disadvantage due to its geographically-peripheral position, (with clear negative implications on material connectivity).

<sup>16</sup> Alternatively, the topic of Turkey–Central Eurasia relations (Turkey being 'the other' middle-tier regional power alongside Iran) would have had been selected instead, as Turkey's economic footprint in the region is an order of magnitude more substantial.

<sup>17</sup> See [wits.worldbank.org/](https://wits.worldbank.org/)

<sup>18</sup> A prominent exception was the close affinity between Iran and Armenia when ruled by their own respective branches of the Arsacid dynasty in periods of the pre-Islamic era.

disproportionate attention here, to the extent of each meriting its own standalone empirical chapter, are the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Uzbekistan. A supplementary rationale behind their appointment as in-depth case studies is the fact that the two republics each represent cores of their own respective Central Eurasian sub-regions, both in terms of demographics and of their military strength.<sup>19</sup> An examination and comparison of both of these republics' relations with Iran is thus an instance of examining and comparing two similar-by-most-metrics case studies (see end of the research methodology section for the main implications of such an approach).

The nature of the immaterial connectivity with Iran and of the shared elite 'cultural capital' is nevertheless of a somewhat dissimilar nature along the Caucasus mountain range, compared to Central Asia. The eastern half of Transcaucasia formed a part of the same dynastic polities as the Iranian Plateau until relatively recently. It was a series of military defeats by Imperial Russia in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that put an end to Qajar Persian suzerainty over these territories (see Figure n.1). This relative 'recency' ensured common developments in the religious sphere, such as the collective conversion of the Safavid realms from the *Ḥanafī* Sunni *madḥab* to the *Ja'farī* school of Shia Islam at the very beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In the linguistic realm, early-Azerbaijani Turkish, rather than New Persian, was the spoken non-elite interethnic *lingua franca* in the autonomous khanates of the Caucasus' southeast, including Muslim-ruled Eastern Armenia, as it had been in Kartli-Kakheti and in the Southern half of Dagestan.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Azerbaijan is also the largest South Caucasian economy while Uzbekistan finds itself at the strategic crossroads of Central Asia, bordering all of the other four post-Soviet republics, as well as bordering non-post-Soviet Afghanistan.

<sup>20</sup> Grenoble, Leonore A. *Language Policy in the Soviet Union*. Springer. 2003: 131.



In contrast to the latter linguistic configuration, Central Asia has Persian—a tongue the contemporary historic stage of which is indigenous to Greater Khorasan—still in common vernacular use by a substantial minority. While admittedly receding in Uzbekistan, the language is, in many ways, embedded among the urban (and sedentary more broadly) populations of the upper Amu Darya basin, parts of the Zarafshan<sup>21</sup> and the Fergana valleys for longer than New Persian has been in vernacular use on the Iranian plateau (at least outside of Sistan and Iranian Khorasan).<sup>22</sup> More than half a millennium ago, with the decline of the Timurids, the intermittent political reality of both Central Asia and the Iranian Plateau being subsumed under the same dynastic polity came to an end—aside from contested outliers such as the Merv oasis and Herat. Central Asia therefore became subject to separate political, cultural and literary developments, a process of divergence from the Iranian Plateau and from the southwestern shores of the Caspian. It also remained unaffected by the aforementioned religious shift that took place in the Safavid realms.<sup>23</sup> Much unlike the situation in Azerbaijan, in Central Asia, Persian—still natively spoken by one-fifth to one-quarter (if Afghanistan is not counted) of the total population—is not primarily associated with the country of Iran. It is rather linked to the ethno-linguistic construct of Tajik(i), codified and promoted in the Soviet era.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> The two ancient cities of Samarqand and Bukhara are located in the lower reaches of the Zarafshan valley.

<sup>22</sup> None of the contemporary non-Turkic minority languages and so-called dialects of Northern, Central and Western Iran actually descend from Middle Persian, except arguably for Luri-Bakhtiari and Caucasian Tat. Linguistic evidence suggests that a likely-Median-descended dialect continuum—preserved in the form of the moribund Central Plateau Dialect (CPD) group (a.k.a. ‘Central dialects’)—only gave way to New Persian as the vernacular of Central Iran in the last couple of centuries. See Windfuhr, Gernot L. “Central Dialects”. *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, December 15, 1991. URL: [iranicaonline.org/articles/central-dialects](http://iranicaonline.org/articles/central-dialects)

<sup>23</sup> See Bečka, Jiří. “Tajik Literature from the 16th Century to the Present”. in Rypka, Jan (Ed.) *History of Iranian Literature*. 1968: 483-606..

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

## I) Definitions of key concepts

Since the backdrop for this study of the bilateral and multilateral relations between Iran and the republics of Central Eurasia is the proliferation of overland connectivity initiatives, it would be worthwhile to define what is actually meant by ‘connectivity’. This term is it to be understood here as semantically related, but not identical, to ‘infrastructure’. Specific infrastructure networks are the actual means through which physical, i.e. material, connectivity—defined as a state of affairs contingent on the availability and on the use of infrastructure “link[ing] geographical locations to facilitate the flow of goods, services, technology, finance, and people, in order to enhance mobility and networking.”<sup>25</sup> It is useful to further subdivide infrastructure between ‘hard’ infrastructure—our conventional understanding of infrastructure networks consisting of road, rail, bridges, tunnels, pipelines, power lines, fibre optic cables, port facilities and the like—and ‘soft’ infrastructure—financial payment systems, customs regimes and the institutional framework for swap arrangements.<sup>26</sup> Empirical data suggests that developing nations that happen to be electoral democracies underperform in the development of crucial national infrastructure compared to their authoritarian counterparts, possibly due to the myopic nature of an executive tied to electoral cycles.<sup>27</sup> The majority of post-Soviet republics studied here have authoritarian political systems, as does Iran itself, being arguably therefore in a more advantageous position to push such large-scale projects through, all other things being equal.

As a counterpart to physical, i.e. ‘material’, connectivity, the novel concept of ‘immaterial connectivity’ is entertained here to describe the previously-discussed

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<sup>25</sup> Hill, Hal. “Connectivity and Infrastructure: Editors’ Overview”. *Asian Economic Policy Review*. 11(2) 2016: 161.

<sup>26</sup> See Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 162.

linguistic, cultural and kinship ties that link together populations and national elites alike on both sides of the southern section of the former Soviet border. The actual effect of immaterial connectivity—a form of cultural capital that should, at least in theory, facilitate communication and the quest for common ground—on bilateral relations between nation-states is far from established. Compared to its ‘material-connectivity’ counterpart, immaterial connectivity fails to reliably secure a net-positive effect on said relations. On grounds of their sheer complexity and ‘intersubjective richness’, the two empirical case studies of Iran–Azerbaijan and Iran–Uzbekistan relations are the most apt ones to examine to what extent such a ‘civilizational affinity’ can serve as an asset, and to what degree can it be a liability. With these two cases—which dwarf other regional dyads in terms of complexity and volatility—out of the way, certain generalizations can hopefully be inferred regarding Iran’s relationship with the remaining Central Eurasian republics. Separate assessments can consequently be made for Iran’s relationship with each of the two adjacent post-Soviet sub-regions, leaving room also for the least-granular-level assessment of Tehran’s general relationship with Central Eurasia.

Another potentially contentious political notion mobilized here is that of a ‘state’. It is seemingly easy to define by its necessary attributes: a fixed territory, a permanent population, and the capacity to keep enacting sovereignty throughout said territory. However, many of the historical polities discussed here when exploring antecedents of Iran–South Caucasus and Iran–Central Asia relations lacked uncontested, clearly delineated boundaries and their capacity to rule was often rendered more precarious by webs of tributary relationships. Suzerainty was the norm, more so than sovereignty. On occasions where such premodern dynastic states are discussed here, the

term ‘polity’ will tend to be used to disabuse the reader of the somewhat misleading mental image of a modern bureaucratized centralized state. Another advantage of using ‘polity’—chiefly when referring to premodern political entities or modern-era federal units—is in sidestepping the implications that these political entities would clear the necessary preconditions to ‘count as a state’. ‘Polity’ is varyingly used here to refer to the Safavid Empire, but also to the autonomous Khanates North of the Aras River that had been nominally recognizing the authority of the Qajar shahs in Tehran, or to individual constituent Soviet Socialist Republics—often a mere façade of federal autonomy in the centralized Soviet system where the key decisions were made in Moscow—or to the short-lived breakaway Soviet-puppet states carved out of Iran’s Northwest in the mid-1940s.

In the conceptual arena of ‘state’ and ‘statehood’, another set of terms that warrants a definition is ‘statebuilding’ and ‘nationbuilding’. ‘Statebuilding’ is to be understood here as the setting up and maintaining of an institutional capacity of a state, typically a newly-independent one or one newly relieved of a foreign occupation or an internal armed conflict. ‘Nationbuilding’, conceptualized here as a subset of statebuilding, consists of the creation and inculcation—via education systems, mandatory military service, national holidays and mass media—of a collective identification with a nation-state. I draw upon Benedict Anderson’s concept of ‘imagined communities’, nations here being what “nationalised political subjects [grow to conceive of as] discrete political entities”.<sup>28</sup> In conjunction, a key concept in the undertaking of nationbuilding is that of ‘invented traditions’, a process described by

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<sup>28</sup> Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso Books, 1983: 15.

Eric Hobsbawm.<sup>29</sup> Both notions aid in the disabusing of oneself of primordialist conceptions of uncomplicated continuity between past and present ‘incarnations of statehood and nationhood’ and of authenticity of given signifiers of nationhood.

The key concept most marked by polysemy here is that of ‘identity’. It is a dynamic and context-dependent relational concept that establishes an individual or collective ‘self’ juxtaposed against an individual or collective ‘other’. On the international level of interaction between sovereign states, identity becomes an “analytical ‘prism’ which allows us to gauge the complexity of different dimensions converging into the political practice of foreign policy”.<sup>30</sup> As identity relies on historically-constructed and culturally-contingent ideas of self, there is a major intersubjective narrative dimension to any sense of identity, especially if one adopts a constructivist interpretation of the observed slice of reality, as is the case in the present piece of research. At the same time, the situationality and the contingent nature of state identity allows state subjects to pragmatically wield different facets of identity in different contexts and strategically deploy those in before various interlocutors.<sup>31</sup> Iran will therefore be an ‘anti-imperialist’ revolutionary state when interacting with Venezuela or Cuba, but may chiefly be a ‘Muslim country’—one that concerns itself ostensibly with the interest of the global Islamic *Umma* when pursuing its own interests in its interaction with other ostensibly Muslim state actors. On the level of international relations, identity is “a performative synthetization of meaning”. It is imbued with

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<sup>29</sup> See Hobsbawm, Eric; Ranger, Terence (Eds.) *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge University Press. 1983.

<sup>30</sup> Stark Urrestarazu, Ursula. “‘Identity’ in International Relations and Foreign Policy Theory”, in Hellmann, Gunther; Jørgensen, K.E. (Eds.) *Theorizing Foreign Policy in a Globalized World*. Springer. 2015: 143.

Tichý, Lukáš. *EU-Russia Energy Relations: A Discursive Approach*. Springer. 2019: 47-96.

<sup>31</sup> Stark Urrestarazu, Ursula. “‘Identity’ in International Relations and Foreign Policy Theory”, in Hellmann, Gunther; Jørgensen, K.E. (Eds.) *Theorizing Foreign Policy in a Globalized World*. Springer. 2015: 137.

cultural narratives and can be deemed “a constitutive element of foreign policy practice.”<sup>32</sup> A productive dialectic can also be discerned between identity, as it operates on a national level, and identity, as it operates at a broader-region level.

By ‘region’ here, the implicit understanding is in reference to geographic groupings of multiple neighbouring states. A clear unambiguous example would be ‘post-Soviet Central Asia’, which consists solely of the five republics of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The latter grouping has the additional feature—but not a necessary prerequisite in this specific understanding of ‘region’—of shared inherited institutional legacies. ‘Region’ can nonetheless just as well refer to sub-state-level territorial units, such as Khorezm in modern-day Uzbekistan. Last, but not least, a region can also be delineated in a way that includes both sub-state-level territories and a number of sovereign states. For instance, the broadest definition of Central Asia also includes Mongolia, western China, the northernmost parts of the Indian subcontinent, Afghanistan and much of the Caspian Basin. With major geopolitical upheavals and with the redrawing of international borders, the very same territory can pass from one subtype of ‘region’ to another. This indeed happened in the past, virtually overnight, in case of the collapse of the Soviet Union in late-1991. Unless stated otherwise, the very first of the listed definitions of ‘region’ is used here, i.e. a conceptual grouping of contemporary independent states around a territorial logic. If one were to follow a Copenhagen-School understanding of regions (i.e. regional security complex theory), interlocking security considerations would be the overriding factor delineating a region.<sup>33</sup> Under this definition, Iran would

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 139-140.

<sup>33</sup> See Buzan, Barry; Wæver, Ole. *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*. Cambridge University Press, 2003.

squarely fall into the Middle Eastern regional security complex, and not necessarily into any ‘Eurasian’ (i.e. post-Soviet) ones. By contrast, were one to espouse an English-school-of-International-Relations understanding of regions, then shared elite socialization and a common intersubjectivity are what collectively constitute a region.<sup>34</sup> This would render post-Soviet Central Asia a discrete (sub-)regional unit, one that definitionally excludes Afghanistan (and Iran doubly so). As is shown in the subsequent chapters, a source of perennial tension is the mismatch between what states a given regional actor sees as ‘of the region’ and, conversely, what polities are deemed ‘outsiders’ to the region, and by whom.

The last key terms pertaining to the regional matters addressed here are ‘regionalism’ and ‘regional integration’. The former is to be understood as a preference of state actors to resolve matters of region-wide importance on a regional level in a coordinated multilateral fashion. It also involves refraining from deeming the challenges that regional stakeholders face zero-sum games. A common phase of regionalism is the creation of institutionalized regional fora regularly bringing together heads of state or high-level members of the executive branch. A practical example of regionalist efforts would be the enlargement of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) in the early 1990s—a move heavily promoted by Iran, one of ECO’s original founding members—to include the newly-independent Republic of Azerbaijan and the five post-Soviet republics of Central Asia. ‘Regional integration’, by contrast, is a much more advanced and consciously-cultivated form of regionalism. It implies a high degree of harmonization of legal norms, especially those pertaining to regional trade, and a degree of national-sovereignty-pooling. For the latter reason, those among the young post-

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<sup>34</sup> See Costa Buranelli, Filippo. *International Society and Central Asia*. PhD dissertation, King’s College London, 2015.

Soviet states that would be most jealously protective of sovereignty, such as Uzbekistan under late president Islam Karimov, traditionally tended to be the most averse to any regional integration schemes.

These concepts are all crucial for the research questions guiding this piece of research. That is the case whether one interrogates to what extent has the proliferation of material connectivity rendered the republics more attuned to the pre-existing immaterial connectivity, or whether one looks at the intersubjective treatment of Iran's more assertive macro-regional role by the national elites on the 'post-Soviet side' of the border (see 'section III' of this chapter for a more-fleshed-out overview).

## **II) Review of the literature**

There is a conspicuous paucity of English-language academic writing on the bilateral and multilateral relations between Iran and the post-Soviet republics to Iran's northwest and to its northeast. This is in particularly stark contrast to the much more substantial volume of original research covering the political dynamics between the states bordering the Persian Gulf or research on Iran's foreign policy pertaining to the Levant. One reason for this is the 'academic siloing' of modern Middle East studies as completely sealed off from any research on adjacent parts of what is alternatively framed as 'Eurasia' or the 'post-Soviet space'. This is compounded by the fact that the discipline relegates the large non-Arab—arguably 'Eurasian', in the sense here of literally straddling the continent boundary, or at least being adjacent to it—states of Turkey and Iran to its own conceptual margins. This would be as much the case of area



studies, as it would be within academic departments of political science and international relations.

In the scholarly arena, historians-by-training have been somewhat inoculated against this ‘siloed’ and ‘excessively presentist’ understanding of the western half as Asia—still conceptually carved up between those territories until recently under Soviet hegemony and those squarely outside of Moscow’s direct orbit—and thus in the best position already in the 1990s to embark on studies of this very topic. Another advantage historians and linguists have is a keen understanding of the aforementioned ‘civilizational affinity’ by virtue of not being ‘bogged down’ in macroeconomics or geopolitics. When comparing the volume of scholarly output on the post-Soviet-collapse Iran–South Caucasus and Iran–Central Asia dyads, the former is marginally better represented in the secondary literature.

The aforementioned volume of academic output and Western scholarly attention more broadly has ebbed and flowed over course of the past three decades. The early enthusiasm of the 1990s emphasizing the wealth of opportunities for regional cooperation between Iran (or Turkey, for that matter) and Central Eurasia had tapered off by the end of the decade. It gave way to sparser, more soberly-grounded assessments more cognisant of the material and political limitations to region-wide cooperation. The 9-11 attacks and consequent Western military involvement in Afghanistan resuscitated scholarly interest and—alongside the compounding factor of Beijing’s growing regional involvement—produced a demand for a new wave of publications on Central (Eur)asia, under the broad umbrella of the ‘New Great Game’ genre. This discursive *topos* had dominated the Western framing of Central Asian regional affairs, peaked in 2009, and

has since largely fallen out of fashion.<sup>35</sup> The downside of such a framing and of historical analogizing to the ‘long-nineteenth-century’ Russo-British confrontation in Inner Asia—this time swapping the latter for a rivalry over regional influence between the US, Russia, China and India, with Turkey and Iran playing, so to speak, the second fiddle—has been in erroneously depriving individual Central Asian republics of any meaningful degree of political agency. The most recent, and still ongoing, peak in interest in the aforementioned regional dynamics can be associated with China’s ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ (BRI), promising an injection of the long-needed financial liquidity in the region. The proliferation of overland connectivity initiatives in Eurasia represents arguably the biggest regional ‘game-changer’ since the Soviet collapse. For the first time since maritime trade routes—starting with the Portuguese more than half a millennium ago—usurped the preeminent standing of overland trade routes, Central Eurasia’s geopolitical and geoeconomic predicament of being ‘locked’ inside the vastness of the world’s biggest landmass is gradually being turned into a strategic asset. India, the other emerging Asian power alongside China, would rather not be left behind. This explains Delhi’s—admittedly more modest—answer to Beijing’s BRI, explored in the following chapter.

#### *A) Secondary literature*

Ramazani (1992) is likely the earliest within Western academia to sketch an image of Iran’s relations with its post-Soviet neighbourhood, albeit more as a coda to his examination of Tehran’s relations with its southern, ‘Gulf region—the author’s chief area of expertise—neighbours. Tracing the challenging context of Iran having had just recently exited a protracted armed conflict with Iraq and the passing of Ayatollah

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<sup>35</sup> Google Ngram viewer on “New Great Game”.

URL: [books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=new+great+game&smoothing=0](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=new+great+game&smoothing=0)

Khomeini, Ramazani perceptively identifies security concerns over potential conflict spillover, with risks of instability emanating from the freshly disintegrated Soviet Union, as the overriding preoccupation on Tehran's 'northern' agenda. Already this early into the 1990s, the immense potential of Iran's overland connectivity with Eurasia is brought to light. Uncharacteristically for scholarship on the same topic, Ramazani predicates the success of Iran's 'northern policy vector' on the development of close political and economic ties with Uzbekistan, emphasizing the sheer size of Uzbekistan's population and therefore its growth potential as a large consumer market for Iranian goods. Turkmenistan—ostensibly bereft of any other meaningful role—is bound to merely facilitate the transit of said goods.<sup>36</sup>

Herzig (1995) is the first English-language publication focusing exclusively on 'Iran and the Former Soviet South' to go beyond the format of a mere academic-journal article or a single book chapter. His biggest contribution is in shedding light on the viewpoints of Iran's elite, most particularly their discursive strategy of constructing a politically-expedient 'regional player–extraregional player' dichotomy. Like Ramazani, Herzig highlights the 'spoiler' role that the United States has sought in dissuading the aforementioned former Soviet republics from establishing close political and economic ties with Iran. This effort is countered by Tehran's efforts to stay in the good graces of Moscow and by Iran's reassurances to the ex-Soviet republics that its 'northern policy designs' are 'marked by self-restraint', ideologically-speaking, and benignly pragmatic. Herzig relies heavily on articles featured in the *Moṭāle'āt-e Āsiyā-ye Markazī va Qafqāz* journal, published by a think tank closely affiliated with Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Herzig's foresight was in detecting Iran's ongoing endogenous weakness of

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<sup>36</sup> Ramazani, R. K. "Iran's Foreign Policy: Both North and South". *Middle East Journal*, 46(3) 1992: 393-412.

lacking financing capacities. This deficiency has prevented Tehran from taking up the reins in promoting overland connectivity for the broader region.<sup>37</sup>

Hunter (1996) sketches the axes of geopolitical alignment within Central Eurasia. In retrospect, she seems to have overestimated the weight and durability of these alliances. Hunter makes a conceptual contribution in using Arnold Toynbee's concept of the 'Iranic-Islamic world' for Iran as well as for its newly emancipated northern neighbourhood.<sup>38</sup> Freij (1996) and the later Johnston (2007) build an image of Iran's supposed 'fundamentally pragmatic policies' towards Central Asia, alongside the South Caucasus in the latter case. This is illustrated in the literature by Tehran's conciliatory policy in mitigating the Karabakh conflict and the Tajik civil war, where concessions were made to non-Muslim or neo-Communist political forces respectively in ways that run counter to the Islamic Republic's declared ideological imperatives of Muslim solidarity.<sup>39</sup>

Menashri (1998)'s edited volume surpasses similar publications in scale and scope of the undertaking. The majority of contributors postulate a 'reintegration' of Central Asia into the Middle East, overwhelmingly focusing—from within the latter region—on Turkey and Iran. The possibility to directly compare and contrast Turkey's and Iran's regional policy milestones and setbacks provides much-needed historical context and a broader perspective on the present research topic. Furthermore, some of the more historically-oriented chapters advance an understanding that the handful of generations of Central Asia under Russian-Soviet rule should not obscure the fact that

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<sup>37</sup> Herzig, Edmund. *Iran and the Former Soviet South*. Chatham House, 1995.

<sup>38</sup> Hunter, Shireen T. "Chains across Eurasia". *The World Today*, 52(12) 1996: 313-316.

<sup>39</sup> Freij, Hanna Yousif. "State Interests vs. the *Umma*: Iranian Policy in Central Asia". *Middle East Journal*, 50(1) 1996: 71-83.

Johnston Jr, W. J. "From Revolution to Realpolitik: Iran's Foreign Policy in Central Asia and the South Caucasus since 1991". thesis for Florida State University. 2007.

much of Central Asia has historically always been an integral part of the same ‘civilizational sphere’ as Iran.<sup>40</sup>

In the 2004 special issue of the Chatham House-run journal *International Affairs* titled ‘Regionalism and the Changing International Order in Central Eurasia’ and edited by Roy Allison—who is himself a contributor in Allison (2004)—Herzig (2004) and Bohr (2004) explore the structural limits to regional cooperation initiatives between Iran and Central Asia and those within Central Asia itself respectively. The former provides a more optimistic outlook, as regional cooperation had not reached a point where any of the states involved would be apprehensive about the need to pool their sovereignty. Unlike his prior work, Herzig (2004) sees regional connectivity as a means to achieve greater integration in other areas of cooperation as well, suggesting potential for ‘functional spillover’. Such a dynamic would nonetheless be a top-down state-driven process and would thus differ starkly from the neo-functionalist paradigm emblematic of European integration.<sup>41</sup> Since the time of its publication, there have been no signs of such a self-perpetuating ‘virtuous cycle’ of regional integration taking place.

Hiro (2009) is another rare case of a monograph covering the aforementioned regional dynamics. Hiro brings up in-depth comparisons between Iran and Turkey’s roles in Central Asia to the table, chiefly in terms of connectivity and trade. The author highlights the successes of Tehran’s persistent signalling and reassurances of its benign regional intentions within the post-Soviet space. Citing a Turkmen interlocutor, Hiro attributes the zero-problem nature of Iran–Turkmenistan relations to the dearth of closer

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<sup>40</sup> Menashri, David (Ed.) *Central Asia Meets the Middle East*. London; Portland: Frank Cass, 1998.

<sup>41</sup> Allison, Roy. “Virtual regionalism, regional structures and regime security in Central Asia”. *International Affairs*, 80(3) 2004: 185-202.

Herzig, Edmund. “Regionalism, Iran and Central Asia”. *International Affairs*, 80(3) 2004: 503-517.

Bohr, Annette. “Regionalism in Central Asia: New geopolitics, old regional order”. *International Affairs*, 80(3) 2004: 485-502.

historico-cultural links, despite the two countries' geographic proximity.<sup>42</sup> A similarly broad—albeit not single-author—volume is Kamrava (2016), touching on related issues, albeit concerning the South Caucasus' relations with Turkey and Iran, rather than Central Asia's. Koolae et al. (2010) offers a singular perspective of Iran-based scholars published in English. The co-authors limit their assessment to Tehran's relations with the South Caucasus. Their separate treatment of each republic could indicate a functional impossibility of a holistic sub-regional vantage point for Tehran, let alone a coherent South Caucasus policy. The authors appear to fall into a trap of attributing Tehran's lack of more substantial progress in developing political and economic relations with the South Caucasus in its near-entirety to US meddling. This perhaps-too-facile of an assessment was challenged more recently by the firm rejection by all three leaders of the South Caucasian republic of personal appeals by then-US secretary of state John Bolton to join Washington's 'maximum pressure' campaign.<sup>43</sup> Among Iranian scholars publishing in English, Hamidreza Azizi provides—in both Atai et al. (2012) and Azizi (2018)—exhaustive overviews of Iran–Central Eurasia regional dynamics from the specific vantage point of connectivity.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> This is in alignment with the chief hypothesis of this very academic work that particularly close 'civilizational affinity' with Iran can actually be a liability that complicates bilateral relationships, particularly in light of the ongoing nationbuilding processes on the 'post-Soviet side' of the border.

<sup>43</sup> Azizi, Hamidreza. "Iran and the Eurasian Transport Initiatives: Short-term Challenges, Long-term Opportunities". *Caucasus International*, 8(2) 2018: 132-133.

<sup>44</sup> Dilip, Hiro. *Inside Central Asia: A Political and Cultural History of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkey, and Iran*. Overlook Duckworth, Peter Mayer Publishers, Inc. New York & London. 2009.

Monshipouri, Mahmood. "Pipeline politics in Iran, Turkey and the South Caucasus" and Ahmadi, Hamid. "Clash of Nationalisms: Iranian Response to Baku's Irredentism", in Kamrava, Mehran (Ed.) *The Great Game in West Asia: Iran, Turkey and the South Caucasus*. Oxford University Press, 2016.

Koolae, Elaheh; Hafezian, Mohammad Hossein. "The Islamic Republic of Iran and the South Caucasus Republics". *Iranian Studies*, 43(3): 2010, 391-409.

Atai, Farhad; Azizi, Hamidreza. "The Energy Factor in Iran–Turkmenistan Relations", *Iranian Studies*, 45(6) 2012.

Azizi, Hamidreza. "Iran and the Eurasian Transport Initiatives: Short-term Challenges, Long-term Opportunities". *Caucasus International*, 8(2) 2018: 123-135.

Therme (2011) and Therme (2012) evoke a finely crafted diptych, with each ‘panel’ treating Iran’s relations with one of the two adjacent post-Soviet sub-regions from Tehran’s policymaking-elite vantage point. The two publications are a tangent of the author’s extensive doctoral research on contemporary Iran–Russia relations. The latter also visibly informs his assessment of Tehran’s relations with Iran’s more immediate Eurasian neighbours. Among literature focusing on Iran’s engagement with its neighbourhood through the specific prism of foreign-policy scholarship, Shahram Akbarzadeh and frequent collaborator James Barry contribute to the extant body of literature with Akbarzadeh (2015) and Akbarzadeh et al. (2016). These pieces provide original insight informed by fieldwork in Tehran and by accompanying elite interviews. Much like Barry, Kouhi-Esfahani (2019) skilfully narrows down her focus to the Iran–Azerbaijan–Armenia regional triad, chiefly from Tehran’s own vantage point, albeit with an explicitly constructivist IR bent. Her key finding is that initial Iranian support for the Baku-Azerbaijani side of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh had been more substantial than the overall scholarship admits. Returning back to Central Asia, Mesbahi (2001) and Mesbahi (2010) provide an informed overview of the aforementioned regional relations through a broad geopolitical lens. This appears informed, at least in part, by the Mesbahi’s prior scholarship on Iran’s mediating role in Tajikistan’s civil war.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Therme, Clément. “Iranian Foreign Policy towards the South Caucasus: Between Revolutionary Ideals and Realpolitik” in Jafalian, Annie (Ed.) *Reassessing Security in the South Caucasus: Regional Conflicts and Transformation*. Routledge. 2011.

Therme, Clément. “When Tehran looks at its regional environment: Iranian think tanks and their analysis of Central Asia”. *Iran Regional Forum* paper no 2, November 2012.

Akbarzadeh, Shahram. “Iran and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Ideology and Realpolitik in Iranian Foreign Policy”. *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 69(1) 2015: 88-103.

Akbarzadeh, Shahram; Barry, James. “State Identity in Iranian Foreign Policy”. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 43(4) 2016: 613-629.

One of the most recent original-research-based contributions to general ‘Iran–Central Asia relations’ literature has been Wastnidge (2017), which builds upon earlier Wastnidge (2014) and Wastnidge (2015). The focus here is exclusively on the Iran–Central Asia side of the equation, rather than the Iran–South Caucasus one. The perspective offered is that of Iranian elites and the conceptual space that Central Asia represents within their worldview. Wastnidge does an excellent job at evaluating the successes and pitfalls of Iran’s cultural diplomacy and Iran’s soft power more broadly. A particular contribution is in highlighting how the presidency of the incendiary populist Ahmadinejad discreetly pursued the continuation of the multilateralism-favouring cultural diplomacy of the reformist Khatami, Ahmadinejad’s predecessor. The most notable case in point had been the promotion of the trilateral Persian-speaking-country forum alongside Afghanistan and Tajikistan.<sup>46</sup>

Out of the body of publications carrying out an in-depth examination of a single bilateral relationship within the broader theme of Iran–‘former Soviet South’ regional ties, Atkin (1992) is the first Western scholar to focus on one major regional dyad, namely Iran–Tajikistan. Atkin is quick to observe early pre-civil-war attempts by Tajikistan’s elites to distance themselves somewhat from Iran by promoting a

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Barry, James. “Brothers or Comrades at Arms: Iran’s Relationship with Armenia and Azerbaijan”, in Akbarzadeh, Shahram; Conduit, Dara (Eds.) *Iran in the World: President Rouhani’s Foreign Policy*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

Kouhi-Esfahani, Marzieh. *Iran’s Foreign Policy in the South Caucasus*. Routledge. 2019.

Mesbahi, Mohiaddin. “Tajikistan, Iran, and the international politics of the ‘Islamic factor’.” *Central Asian Survey*, 16(2) 1997: 141-158.

Mesbahi, Mohiaddin. “Iran’s Foreign Policy Toward Russia, Central Asia, and the Caucasus”, in Esposito, John L.; Ramazani, R.K. (Eds.) *Iran at the Crossroads*. Palgrave Macmillan. 2001.

Mesbahi, Mohiaddin. “Eurasia between Russia, Turkey, and Iran”, in Freire, Maria Raquel; Kanet, Roger E. (Eds.) *Key Players and Regional Dynamics in Eurasia: The Return of the “Great Game”*. Palgrave Macmillan. 2010

<sup>46</sup> Wastnidge, Edward. “Pragmatic Politics: Iran, Central Asia and Cultural Foreign Policy”. *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, 15(4) 2014: 119-130.

Wastnidge, Edward. “The Modalities of Iranian Soft Power: From Cultural Diplomacy to Soft War”. *Politics*, 35(3–4) 2015: 364–377.

Wastnidge, Edward. “Central Asia in the Iranian Geopolitical Imagination”. *Cambridge Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 2017: 1-13.



nationbuilding narrative that accentuates the Eastern Iranian (i.e. Bactrian and Sogdian) ‘ancestral components’ of the Tajik nation.<sup>47</sup> She also takes notice of the fact that Central Eurasian elites are, on the whole, quite negatively attuned to grandiose statements by Iranian officials appealing to Central Eurasia’s historical and cultural commonality in ways that could be easily construed as them laying claims that follow a culturally-chauvinistic logic.<sup>48</sup>

Shaffer (2002) is arguably the most contentious publication listed here, exploring the Iran—Republic-of-Azerbaijan dyad, as informed by the ‘Iranian-Azerbaijani minority question’. The author breaks with the prevailing scholarly understanding—a prominent proponent of which is Touraj Atabaki, as shown in Atabaki (2000)—of an ostensibly-well-integrated Azerbaijani minority living compactly as a local majority in northwestern Iran and broadly espousing a civic Iranian identity. Shaffer aligns rather with a revisionist narrative traceable back to nationalist scholars in Baku, which postulates a ‘Southern Azerbaijan’ inhabited by ever-increasingly ‘ethnically-aware’—as prompted by the emancipation of ‘Northern Azerbaijanis’, just next door, from Moscow’s foreign rule—Iranian Azerbaijanis. Shaffer does so with cherry-picked examples and her assertions are not rooted in actual ethnographic fieldwork in Iranian Azerbaijan. Kraus et al. (2016) and Souleimanov et al. (2017) provide an ‘updated’, but also more measured, version of this revisionist narrative. The co-authors offer a methodologically-better-grounded overview of Iran—Republic-of-Azerbaijan relations informed by domestic considerations pertaining to Iran’s own substantial Azerbaijani-Turkish-speaking minority. While there have admittedly been

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<sup>47</sup> Tajiki Persian, by virtue of being a codified national standard of New Persian, is of course a Western Iranian language.

<sup>48</sup> Atkin, Muriel. “Tajikistan’s Relations with Iran and Afghanistan”. *The National Council for Soviet and East European Research*, George Washington University. 1992.

more recent cases of public expression of Azerbaijani discontent in Iran—one that could, on occasion, take the form of ethnonationalist contestation—the ‘conceptual’ centrality of Baku in these matters had reportedly declined. Young ethnonationalistically-minded Iranian Azerbaijanis, Kraus and Souleimanov assert, no longer look to Baku as a source of their politico-cultural aspirations, but rather to Ankara.<sup>49</sup>

If one were to single out academic research that does the best job at tracing the ongoing statebuilding and nationbuilding processes within the Muslim-majority republics of the post-Soviet Caspian-Central Asian region—within which one should ideally be able to discern particularly Iran’s ‘conceptual role’—several individual in-depth country-case studies come to mind. Cornell (2010) is a ‘must-read’ for the Baku-Azerbaijan’s (a term I use here to disambiguate the latter republic from Iranian Azerbaijan) post-independence period. Yilmaz (2012), alongside Yilmaz (2015), goes ‘further back’ in his exploration of the early-Soviet-era Moscow-driven top-down efforts to consolidate a distinct, politically-expedient identity out the ill-defined ‘Transcaucasian Turk-Tatar’ ethnolinguistic component. The latter would, of course, eventually arise as an ‘Azerbaijani (Turkish)’ identity, with subsequent nationbuilding historiography debates between Moscow-or-Leningrad-based Iranologists and Baku-based Soviet Azerbaijani historians. When we cross the Caspian, conceptually-speaking, we find Edgar (2004). The latter provides an insightful overview of the

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<sup>49</sup> Shaffer, Brenda. *Borders and Brethren: Iran and the Challenge of Azerbaijani Identity*. MIT Press. 2002.

Atabaki, Touraj. *Azerbaijan: Ethnicity and the Struggle for Power in Iran*, London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2000.

Kraus, Josef; Souleimanov, Emil. “A Failed Comeback? Understanding Iranian Policies in the South Caucasus”, *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 18(5) 2016: 448-464.

Souleimanov, Emil; Kraus, Josef. “Iran’s Azerbaijan Question in Evolution: Identity, Society, and Regional Security”, Silk Road Paper, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, September 2017.

Soviet-era creation of the Turkmen Soviet republic, alongside efforts to consolidate an umbrella-identity that could include the various Turkmen tribes of the region. Edgar highlights the role of Soviet-Azerbaijani educators in bringing literacy to the Turkmen and disagreements with local Turkmen intellectuals over a codified literary standard for Turkmen. As an edited volume, Schlyter (2014) provides a broad overview of the nationbuilding processes—including the mission to devise a nationalized historiography—of the Turkic republics of ex-Soviet Central Eurasia, the most illustrious contribution being a chapter authored by Yunus Emre Gürbüz. Khalid (2015), penned by the leading expert on late-19<sup>th</sup> century/early-20<sup>th</sup> century Central Asia and on the Russian-Empire-spanning *Jadid* intellectual movement, is the ultimate reference specifically for the Soviet-era ‘top-down ethnogenesis’ of the most numerous contemporary group in post-Soviet Central Asia—the Uzbeks. The most recent ambitious scholarly undertaking that seeks to trace the ethnogenesis of a Central Asian people is Foltz (2019). The author dedicates the short contemplative final chapter to the Persian speakers of Afghanistan, whom he includes in the understanding of Tajiks—a relatively recent development that is downstream from the Soviet creation of Tajikistan across the upper Amu Darya—thus possibly doubling the ethnolinguistic group’s overall demographic size. A parallel downstream effect of Moscow’s nationalities policy is the eventual subsuming of all Eastern-Iranian-speaking Nizari Ismaili Muslims of the Pamir Knot—divided between modern-day Tajikistan, Afghanistan, China and Pakistan—under the umbrella of ‘Tajik’. All of these publications serve as invaluable sources for the present examination of Iran’s historical and ‘conceptual’ role in the ongoing nationbuilding narratives in Central Eurasia.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Cornell, Svante. *Azerbaijan since Independence*. Routledge. 2010.

The present piece of research, especially its second chapter, very much build upon the aforementioned secondary literature. One gap in the scholarship that it intends to fill is in shifting the regional equation towards a greater acknowledgement of agency of the state actors on the ‘post-Soviet’ side. This is something serious portions of the secondary literature do not engage with to a sufficient degree, as epitomized by the aforementioned ‘Great Game’ imagery. This dissertation also seeks to present an updated picture of the regional state of affairs, as crucial developments transpired in the wider region that promise to radically change any state actor’s policy calculations. By the 2021-2022, but also since then, a number of events had occurred that rendered no longer relevant several issues that had been the focus of policy interest of the prior decades. Similarly, other longstanding issues have been downgraded from the top of the policy agenda in light of these developments. Many a scholar had academic work dedicated to Iran’s role in aiding with the negotiated settlement that put an end to the civil war in Tajikistan. Since the 1997 peace agreement, there has not been much rationale to voice the issues in policy circles, however much it sheds light on Tehran’s priorities and its role in the region. Another case has been the death of independent Uzbekistan’s first president Islam Karimov in 2016, which effectively put an end to Uzbekistan’s quasi-isolationist policy. The country under current president Mirziyoyev appears to serve as the main engine of regionalism within post-Soviet Central Asia and

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Yilmaz, Harun. “The Soviet Union and the Construction of Azerbaijani National Identity in the 1930s”. *Iranian Studies*, 46(4) 2012: 511-533.

Yilmaz, Harun. “A Family Quarrel: Azerbaijani Historians against Soviet Iranologists”. *Iranian Studies*, 48(5) 2015: 769-783.

Edgar, Adrienne Lynn. *Tribal Nation: The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan*. Princeton University Press, 2004.

Gürbüz, Y. Emre, “In Search of New Historiographies for Ex-Soviet Turkic States: Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan”, in Schlyter, Birgit (Ed.) *Historiography and Nation-Building among Turkic Populations*, Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, 2014.

Khalid, Adeeb. *Making Uzbekistan: Nation, Empire, and Revolution in the Early USSR*. Cornell University Press. 2015.

Foltz, Richard. *A History of the Tajiks: Iranians of the East*. I.B. Tauris. 2019.

beyond. 2018 marked a landmark agreement signed by all riparian Caspian countries setting up broad principles of Caspian delineation and the legal-institutional framework for any subsequent bilateral boundary delineation agreements. Iran remains the sole signatory yet to ratify the agreement, but the Caspian is no longer the hot-button issue it was throughout the first two and a half decades of the post-Soviet-independence period.

The autumn 2020 strategic victory of the Republic of Azerbaijan over Armenia and the breakaway republic of Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh in Armenian), as well as the much-more-recent unexpected September-2023 pull-out of Russian peacekeepers that precipitated Baku-Azerbaijani military and administrative advance into the Armenian enclave, itself causing a massive Armenian exodus changes the regional equation. Since most stages of the more-than-three-decades-long conflict sidelined Tehran's mediation attempts, the Karabakh issue seems to have at the very least undergone a fundamental change in nature, not least for Iranian decisionmakers. The summer 2021 offensive that allowed the Taliban movement to take over Afghanistan's capital also effectively removed the vestiges of American military presence on Iran's eastern flank, as did it dissolve the need for the Northern Distribution Network involving a number of post-Soviet republics of the region. Last, but not least, the summer of 2023 brought full SCO membership to Tehran after years of 'banging at the door'. These matters therefore no longer necessarily keep decisionmakers on either side of the former southern USSR border up at night, so to speak. That should not lull anybody into the false impression that they were somehow not central to Iran–Central Eurasia relations at one point in time and that they did not reveal key elements of the regional dynamic. The value of prior three decades of aforementioned research on Iran–post-independence-Central-Eurasia relations is, among many other things, in not letting this slew of new

developments obfuscate the sheer centrality of past policy concerns. The contribution of this piece of research stems, in part, from its auspicious timing. In a quote attributed to Lenin “There are decades where nothing happens; and there are weeks where decades happen”.

*B) A brief overview of primary sources*

As is shown later in the present chapter, the primary empirical source for this entire research project is about a dozen elite interviews carried out in Baku in the autumn of 2021 and another dozen-or-so in Tashkent in the spring of 2022. That said, a small number of academic publications, penned by a small subset of the interlocutors themselves (written work which would under any other circumstances be deemed a secondary source) served effectively as a complementary primary source. Valiyev (2017), Yuldasheva (2017) and Yuldasheva (2020) are the most notable cases. The latter add another layer of context to interviews carried out with the scholars in Baku and Tashkent respectively and further the interviewees’ main arguments in ways that a 60-90 minute meeting could never do. Alternatively, the takeaways from an in-advance-consulted publication of an interviewee helped in orienting the direction of the interview itself. In this category of primary sources, there is a roughly-half-way split between the publications written in English and those written in Russian.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Valiyev, Anar. “Iranian Soft Power in Azerbaijan: Does Religion Matter?”, in Jödicke, Ansgar (Ed.) *Religion and Soft Power in the South Caucasus*, Routledge. 2017.

Yuldasheva, Guli. *Geopolitičeskie protsessy v sovremennoĭ tsentral’noĭ Azii: Iran i SŠA* [Geopolitical Processes in Contemporary Central Asia: Iran and the US]. Latvian Institute of International Affairs, Riga. 2017.

Yuldasheva, Guli. “Iran-Uzbekistan Relations in the Regional Security Context”. *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding*, 8(1) 2020: 187-202.

On the topic of European academic-source languages, Russian-language publications are also relied-on as secondary sources, the most prominent case being scholarship by Moscow-based Sergei Druzhilovsky. Scholars on ‘Iran–Eurasia’ Mohammad-Reza Djalili and Clément Therme have published in both French and English, as did Bayram Balci. A single consulted relevant publication, published by Carlos Echeverría Jesús, is in Spanish.

Another batch of primary sources consists of publications attributable to members of Iran's academic and foreign-policy elite, of which the overwhelming majority has been published in Persian. In the early 1990s, Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs set up the think tank Center for the Study of Central Asia and the Caucasus under the aegis of the Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS). Since then, two quarterlies have been released on a regular basis: the Persian-language *Moṭāle'āt-e Āsiyā-ye Markazī va Qafqāz* and the English-language *Amu Darya*.<sup>52</sup> The Oral History Unit of the aforementioned IPIS also published the memoirs of Mohsen Pakaein, Iran's ex-ambassador to Thailand, Uzbekistan, Zambia and the Republic of Azerbaijan, with each deployment being immortalized in a book of its own. The second and the fourth memoir are both of undeniable value here as primary sources. Another publication, this time more scholarly than a mere memoir, is by Iran's former ambassador to the Russian Federation, Mehdi Sanaei. He broadly addresses the topic of relations between Iran and post-independence Central Asia in 2011, made available to me as a primary source in the form of a 2017 Russian translation. Another worthwhile source is a publication authored by Jahangir Karami, who is, among other academic roles, member of the board of directors at the Tehran think tank Institute for Iran-Eurasia Studies (IRAS). All of the above paint a broad image of policy-informing expertise and elite attitudes, especially in terms of Central Eurasia's conceptual standing. They also manage to effectuate some mitigation of the impossibility to replicate my Baku and Tashkent fieldwork template also in Tehran.

The last cluster of Persian-language (and to a lesser extent, English, Russian, Azerbaijani and Uzbek-language) primary sources are various on-line press releases

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<sup>52</sup> Therme, Clément. "When Tehran looks at its regional environment: Iranian think tanks and their analysis of Central Asia". *Iran Regional Forum* paper no 2, November 2012: 5-6.

pertaining to new ostensible milestones in Iran–Central Eurasia relations, most notably those reached over the course of the past decade.<sup>53</sup> This primary-source base admittedly suffers from excessive optimism and lack of more solid material grounding, most notably in the sphere of projects of material connectivity. Once this had shown to be the case, I began to automatically triangulate media coverage of memoranda of understanding and estimates of completion years of specific infrastructure projects—few of which ever materialized within these time limits—and proceed in a more sceptical manner. On a whole, however, all of the aforementioned primary sources either offer valuable insight in the conceptual treatment of Central Eurasia by Iran’s policymaking elites, or provide much-needed additional context that either prepared me better for a given interview in Baku or Tashkent. Alternatively, they did a good job at further contextualizing an-already-transpired interview and rendered a given respondent’s position more explicit.

### III) Research questions and hypothesis

As has been mentioned earlier, this present research project seeks to bring a better understanding of the nature of post-Soviet-collapse relations between Iran and Iran’s

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<sup>53</sup> Sanaei, Mehdi. *Vzaimootnošeniya Irana i Tsentral’noi Azii: Tendentsii i perspektivy* [Iran–Central Asia Relations: Trends and Outlooks] Sadra, 2017 (Translated from 2011 Tehran-published Persian-language original).

Pakaein, Mohsen. *Čahār sāl dar Sarzamīn-e Teymūr: Hāṭerāt-e safīr-e sābeq-e Īrān dar Ozbakestān (1374-1378)* [Four Years in the Land of Tamerlane: Recollections of Iran’s Former Ambassador to Uzbekistan (~1995-1999)] Oral History Unit, Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS) Tehran, 2010.

Pakaein, Mohsen. *Čahār sāl-e ān sū-ye Aras: Hāṭerāt-e Mohsen-e Pāk-āyīn (Dowrān-e sefārat dar Jomhūrī-ye Āzarbāyjān)* [Four Years on the Other Side of the Aras: Recollections of Mohsen Pakaein (The Period at the Embassy in the Republic of Azerbaijan)] Oral History Unit, Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS) Tehran, 2019.

Karami, Jahangir; Karimian, Alireza. “Īrān va Āsiyā-ye Markazī: Ravand-hā-ye manteqe’i va čāsm-andāz-e āyande” [Iran and Central Asia: Regional Processes and Future Outlook]. *Sīyāsāt-e Jahān/World Politics*, 6(3) 1396/2017.



immediate northern neighbourhood. Though it briefly also touches upon the first decade and a half of relations, the actual moment of a historic geopolitical opening, the central focus is the last decade and a half. The way the research goal is to be reached is by finding a productive dialectic between the material and the immaterial connectivity that binds—or promises to bind—the sub-regions together. Due to the sheer number of countries potentially involved, the in-depth analysis concerns itself mainly with the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Uzbekistan. The research questions are phrased in the following fashion:

*Did the recent proliferation of relevant regional infrastructure projects put Iran more acutely on the radar of the academic and foreign-policy elite in the national capitals of post-Soviet Central Eurasia? In what ways?*

*What informs the way Iran's 'immaterial-connectivity-centring overtures' are received in Central Eurasia?*

A supporting question one can tackle only by means of inferring from past policy behaviour, as the primary and secondary sources are silent on the matter: *Does Iran rely on a coherent regional policy towards its immediate post-Soviet neighbourhood?*

As a way to respond to the latter research questions, a corresponding hypothesis is formulated. This, in turn, is tested in the empirical parts of this thesis. The wording of the hypothesis is:

*Much of the developments endogenous to Iran–Central Eurasia relations that cannot be accounted for on grounds of purely material considerations can be instead explained by Iran's own 'civilizational' self-image and by some of the post-Soviet republics' poor*

*receptiveness to Iran's overtures—this apprehension itself being a product of fraught ongoing nationbuilding processes.*

#### **IV) Theoretical framework**

Since subjective phenomena such as elite perceptions, national identity and immaterial connectivity take centre stage—admittedly alongside eminently material ‘hard’ infrastructure—constructivism has been chosen as the most suitable International Relations (IR) theoretical framework for this research project. Rather than representing a comprehensive causal theory for the International Relations academic discipline—in ways analogous to John Mearsheimer’s offensive realism<sup>54</sup>—constructivism is more of a meta-theoretical model, structural in nature.<sup>55</sup> A constructivist paradigm is at the same time an ‘epistemological stance’—by virtue of emphasizing the socially-constructed nature of both knowledge and meaning—as well as an ‘ontological stance’, by virtue of postulating a socially-constructed nature of reality itself.<sup>56</sup> In a way, it is not an outright repudiation of the realist paradigm, as it aligns with the latter insofar as it also deems the state the primary unit of analysis and the main agency-wielding subject of international relations.<sup>57</sup> Constructivism effectively complements the realist framework.<sup>58</sup> While realism does a good job at explaining *Realpolitik* outcomes, constructivism’s explanatory power of a given IR phenomenon is in the latter epistemology describing the concrete underlying dynamics at play (i.e. how exactly has

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<sup>54</sup> See Mearsheimer, John. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. Norton, 2001.

<sup>55</sup> See Berenskoetter, Felix. “Identity in International Relations”. *Oxford Research Encyclopedias. International Studies Association and Oxford University Press*. 2010.

<sup>56</sup> Tichý, Lukáš. *EU-Russia Energy Relations: A Discursive Approach*. Springer. 2019. chapter “A Constructivist–Discursive Approach to Studying EU-Russia Energy Relations”: 47-96.

<sup>57</sup> The state is, within the constructivist framework, understood as a result of historically-contingent interactions and this continues to matter ‘further downstream’.

<sup>58</sup> This is noteworthy, as the dissertation’s hypothesis hinges, in part, on this complementarity.

a given outcome been reached).<sup>59</sup> There are nonetheless key disagreements between realism and constructivism insofar as to what should one attribute the source of state interests. Realism asserts that state interests are exogenous—dictated by the unyielding logic of an anarchic international system—whereas constructivism sees state interests (but also state identity) as endogenous to the states system, a product of the latter’s social structures and in part also of the individual states. The structures of the international system are themselves defined by their intersubjective, rather than by their material, nature.<sup>60</sup> Asserting that cultures and different worldviews are crucial for the understanding of international politics here does not negate the importance geographical and demographic constraints, as well as of economic and military power. It is integral to a constructivist frame of analysis to acknowledge how closely are the immaterial (a.k.a. the ‘discursive’) and the material intertwined.<sup>61</sup>

Unsurprisingly, given how central the concept of identity is for this piece of research, identity is also the central concept for the chosen theoretical framework. We depart from preeminent-constructivist-scholar Alexander Wendt’s conception of ‘state identity’—an emergent property of state interaction in the international (i.e. states) system—and follow instead an understanding of ‘non-Wendtian’ constructivists, who see national culture and identity as undeniable contributors to a state’s identity as in operates in the states system.<sup>62</sup> This does not mean that identities, alongside state interests, can be arbitrarily defined by a state’s political elites. State interests are, at least in part, constrained and informed by the norms of the states system that had contributed

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<sup>59</sup> Wendt, Alexander. “Constructing International Politics”. *International Security*, 20(1) 1995: 76-78.

<sup>60</sup> Wendt, Alexander. “Collective Identity Formation and the International State”. *American Political Science Review*, 88(2) 1994: 384-385.

<sup>61</sup> Hopf, Ted. “The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory”. *International Security*. 23(1) 1998: 177.

<sup>62</sup> Alexandrov, Maxym. “The Concept of State Identity in International Relations: A Theoretical Analysis”. *Journal of International Development and Cooperation*, 10(1) 2003: 35.

to the genesis of a state's identity to begin with.<sup>63</sup> Unlike the realist worldview arguing for a singular invariable state identity as subjects of the anarchic international system driven purely by self-interest, constructivism sees identity as “an empirical question to be theorized within a historical context.”<sup>64</sup> Identities inherent to each sovereign state—even when dynamic, rather than completely static—provide an element of continuity, predictability and meaning to interactions between states and therefore reduce uncertainty and the range of available choices.<sup>65</sup>

The last element of ‘identity’ insofar as it pertains to the constructivist framework, is its propensity to rely on a basic dichotomy between the ‘self’ (or, alternatively, the ‘in-group’) and the ‘other’ (or the ‘out-group’). An example of identity conceptualized in such a way in a constructivist framework would be Ole Wæver’s explanation of how does the European Union define itself in opposition to an ‘ontological other’. Unlike most cases, where this opposition is constructed around a ‘spatial other’—such as in instances of Iranian policy discourse relying heavily on opposing the ‘meddling of extra-regional powers’ in the region—the EU relies on a ‘temporal other’, as the idea of European integration gained mainstream traction in the context of the still-fresh memory of the carnage of the European theatres of WWI and WWII.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Tichý, Lukáš. *EU-Russia Energy Relations: A Discursive Approach*. Springer. 2019. chapter “A Constructivist–Discursive Approach to Studying EU-Russia Energy Relations”: 63.

<sup>64</sup> Hopf, Ted. “The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory”. *International Security*. 23(1) 1998: 175.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 174, 188.

<sup>66</sup> See Wæver, Ole. “European Integration and Security: Analysing French and German discourses on state, nation, and Europe”, in Howarth, David; Torfing, Jacob (Eds.) *Discourse Theory in European Politics: Identity, Policy and Governance*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2005: 33–67.

A key Copenhagen-School concept,<sup>67</sup> equally applicable to a constructivist framework, coined by the aforementioned Wæver is that of ‘securitization’. The latter term describes a process of an issue being discursively politicized to a major extent and consequently imbued with security considerations. In the context of Iran–Central Eurasia relations, Iran’s ‘soft power’ projection<sup>68</sup> has, for instance, been routinely securitized by the secular leaderships of several post-Soviet republics. Conversely, some of Iran’s regional behaviour has been subsequently ‘de-securitized’ in Central Eurasian capitals, as credible reassurances were repeatedly provided and regional confidence-building measures became institutionalized.

Another fact pertaining to Iran and to one’s application of a constructivist epistemology deserves a mention. According to research on Iranian foreign-policy-influencing scholarship, constructivism has particularly solid grounding in Tehran’s IR circles. This can be explained by the centrality of Iran’s *sui generis* ‘civilizational’ and religious status (alongside the extensive ‘immaterial connectivity’ radiating from the Iranian plateau) in Tehran elite’s conceptualization of their own country and of its role in its Eurasian neighbourhood.<sup>69</sup> This in itself would of course not warrant the deployment of a constructivist lens to the examination of Iran’s ‘northern policy vector’. The already-chosen constructivist framework being likely more suitable for engagement with the latter primary sources is a mere ‘additional bonus’.

As has already been alluded to, ‘discourse’ also plays an important role in the constructivist framework (alongside other related frameworks such as

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<sup>67</sup> The Copenhagen School can be argued to have come about as a synthesis of constructivist and realist thought.

<sup>68</sup> See Nye, Joseph. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. Hachette. 2004.

<sup>69</sup> Moshirzadeh, Homeira. “Iranian Scholars and Theorizing International Relations: Achievements and Challenges”. *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace*. 7(1) 2017: 110.

poststructuralism). Discourse is a reflection of the power wielded by knowledge, ideas, culture, language, and comprehensive worldviews (such as organized religion or specific political ideologies). Material power considerations alone cannot encapsulate the dynamics at play in the international system.<sup>70</sup> According to constructivists, discourse is the “semantic structure that constructs social reality,” it helps in reproducing the latter. Research on discourse within the international relations field will always tend to fall back on dominant discourses.<sup>71</sup> As we proceed to an inexorable synthesis of the much-discussed concept of identity with that of discourse (both play a key role in the construction of meaning), the latter also constructs social identity, itself defining national leaderships’ attitudes and interests when engaging with other actors in the international arena.

## **V) Research methodology**

It is not unheralded that the main research methodology would be that of discourse analysis. The primary sources subjected to this type of discursive breakdown are a set of elite interviews carried out in Baku in the autumn of 2021 and in Tashkent in the spring of 2022 alongside, to a much lesser extent, instances of Persian-language written elite discourse. These interviews involved scholars specializing in regional policy, international relations, historians and ex-diplomats. 12 individuals were interviewed in total in Baku and 9 in Tashkent.

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<sup>70</sup> Hopf, Ted. “The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory”. *International Security*. 23(1) 1998: 177.

<sup>71</sup> Milliken, Jennifer. “The Study of Discourse in International Relations: A Critique of Research and Methods”. *European Journal of International Relations*. 5(2) 1999: 229-230.

Before diving into the minutiae of discourse analysis, both an admission of the shortcomings of studying a longer period of Iran–Central Eurasia relations by means of two post-Soviet-republic case studies carried out at a specific historical juncture and a concrete plan for mitigating these shortcomings are warranted. There is a ‘presentist bias’ to any discourse, including that touching upon past events. It was pointed out in an earlier section of this chapter just how many issues once considered to be able to ‘make or break’ Iran’s relationship with a given South Caucasian or Central Asian republic are now a mere historical footnote. A case in point is the past controversy over Iran’s accession into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The presentist bias had prioritized issues that seemed of crucial relevance in the 2020-2021 time window. My mitigation consisted of steering the interview in ways that would also allow it to touch upon a given *fait accompli*. It also consisted of engaging in an *a posteriori* triangulation of the interviewer–interviewee dynamic. I had to account for what type of responses could an elite interlocutor tailor to an interaction with a researcher affiliated with a world-famous Western institution of higher learning and for what may have been the interlocutor’s broader rationale for responding in specific ways. I also could not underestimate the heterogeneity of given responses, though certain minor disagreements between members of the elite are expected and, in some ways, actually reify the untouchable central premises of hegemonic national discourse. The aforementioned ‘presentist bias’ is mediated by my reliance on a wealth of secondary sources that cover the entirety of the post-independence period—alongside more historical works, subject to content analysis—though admittedly the central focus remains the last decade and a half of Iran–Central Eurasia relations. The usefulness of the two chosen case studies is in the fact that the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Uzbekistan entertain the

ambivalent, complex and ‘intersubjectively productive’ relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Since Iran’s relationship with countries such as Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and the Christian-majority republics of the Caucasus is based mostly on practical material concerns, the generalizability of the two case studies hinges on the heuristic that one can shed light on unproblematic (i.e. ‘less complex’) regional dyads by partially extrapolating data from more complex ones. As was already mentioned in the earlier part of this chapter, whenever the leveraging of connectivity is limited solely to the ‘material’ constituent component (in light of the paucity of pre-existing ‘immaterial’ links), the countries in a constituent bilateral or multilateral regional relationship start resembling fungible, functionally-near-interchangeable units. The possibility to extrapolate key findings to other country case, or to the (sub-)region more broadly, will therefore only really work in one direction. Both the finding of a coherent pattern of regional policy behaviours and the finding of a conspicuous lack of such a regional pattern would be equally worthwhile from the viewpoint of academic research.

Discourse analysis is a very broad tool, thus the utility in clarifying that the specific subset of discourse analysis used here is the ‘discourse-historical approach’ (DHA) pioneered by the Vienna School of Discourse Analysis, more specifically the scholar Ruth Wodak. The latter’s undertaking was of analysing discourse pertaining to Austria’s nationbuilding process in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>72</sup> It was therefore easily readopted for an examination of Iran–Central Eurasia relations through the prism of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Uzbekistan’s nationbuilding narratives, as encapsulated in elite discourse. Nationbuilding discourse itself takes on different shapes and operates at varying levels of specificity, according to the specific

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<sup>72</sup> See Wodak, Ruth; de Cillia, Rudolf; Reisigl, Martin; Liebhart, Karin. *The Discursive Construction of National Identity*. Edinburgh University Press. 1999.



audience it is addressed to and according to the historical context in which it emerged. Specifically-tailored discursive strategies are mobilized in a context-dependent way.<sup>73</sup> The discourse-historical approach is itself a subset of ‘critical discourse analysis’ and therefore contains some poststructuralist assumptions about the nature of reality, such as it being knowable insofar as it can be conceptualized through language. The critical-theory-informed dimension to this subtype of discourse analysis nevertheless seeks to “transcend the purely linguistic dimension” of discourse, by giving space to the “historical, political, sociological and psychological dimensions in the analysis, theory, and interpretation of a specific discursive event.”<sup>74</sup> Subjectivities—such as the key concept of ‘identity’—are strategically faceted, mediated and contested through discourse. The latter is therefore not just a mere reflection of reality.<sup>75</sup> Past uses of discourse analysis specifically in the IR field could rely on ‘predicate analysis’, a tool used to discern when and how discourses, understood here as ‘systems of social signification’ (i.e. structures naturalized by their use to the extent of being taken for granted), are deployed. Recurring narratives can be inferred from primary source materials addressing the same issue, or multiple closely-related issues, as they serve to uphold the same hegemonic macro-discourse.<sup>76</sup>

Aside from constituent discourse analysis methods of articulation, the genealogical method, juxtaposition<sup>77</sup> (itself not just a constituent method of discourse

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>74</sup> Tekin, Beyza. *Representations and Othering in Discourse: The Construction of Turkey in the EU Context*. John Benjamin’s Publishing Company. 2010. chapter 4: “Representation and Othering in Discourse”: 153.

<sup>75</sup> Luke, Allan. “Text and Discourse in Education: An Introduction to Critical Discourse Analysis”. *Review of Research in Education*. 21, 1995-1996: 3-48.

<sup>76</sup> Milliken, Jennifer. “The Study of Discourse in International Relations: A Critique of Research and Methods”. *European Journal of International Relations*. 5(2) 1999: 231.

<sup>77</sup> The genealogical method looks at discrepancies within bodies of discourse over longer periods of time, while the juxtapositional method looks at analogous discrepancies between two or more producers of closely-related discourses, or within the same body of discourse, not separated by such as temporal rift.

analysis, but also, as is subsequently shown, a frequently deployed strategy concomitant with the production of discourse itself) and narrative analysis more broadly, the key concept within discourse analysis is that of a ‘discursive strategy’—also sometimes referred to as ‘strategies of argumentation’. Once a text is read at face value, discourse analysis invites one to search within the text for what is the actual aim of an utterance or an assertion. Discursive strategies are plans of achieving these political, social or psychological goals by specific linguistic means. Key subjects and factors within an analysed text are singled out from the background discourse via the discursive process—and, most importantly, via a specific linguistic means—of ‘nomination’. In practice, this means identifying what or who is being singled out by the discourse. Conversely, the attributes bestowed upon and actions associated with the latter are discursively encoded through the linguistic process of ‘predication’. The modalities of the latter means of discursive-strategy-realization range from evaluating social actors either negatively or positively to asserting that a specific action or state is discursively associated with them.

The last step of discourse analysis, after identifying a discursive strategy discernible from a text, is therefore to ascertain the aforementioned linguistic means and specific linguistic ‘forms of realization’ of said discursive line of argument.<sup>78</sup> On the fairly-understandable concept of ‘national identity’, one could apply the discursive ‘macro’-strategies of construction, perpetuation (i.e. justification or reproduction), transformation or dismantling. Alongside the latter strategies one can also resort to discursive ‘micro’-strategies, tools of singularization, assimilation or differentiation (i.e.

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<sup>78</sup> See Tekin, Beyza. *Representations and Othering in Discourse: The Construction of Turkey in the EU Context*. John Benjamin’s Publishing Company. 2010. chapter 4: “Representation and Othering in Discourse”: 153-208.

dissimilation).<sup>79</sup> Related discursive strategies are that of downplaying (i.e. relativization or trivialization) and that of avoidance (i.e. omission).

An example of multiple discursive strategies and of their specific linguistic realization being used ‘in concert’ has been examined by Wodak. Austrian Cold War-era leaders ostensibly downplayed their nation’s role in WWII by discursively differentiating post-Anschluss Austria from Nazi Germany. The ‘good’ (or at least devoid-of-agency) Austrians are juxtaposed here with ‘bad’ Germans.<sup>80</sup> A specific linguistic realization of a discursive strategy can be by the use of a *topos* (i.e. a ‘seat’ of an argument, a heuristic used in support of an argument) or, more specifically, of a ‘cultural myth’. Austria is discursively absolved of WWII-era responsibility in Cold War-era political speeches by mobilizing the ‘*topos* of external constraints’, itself bolstered by the entrenched cultural myth of ‘Austria having been Hitler’s first victim’.<sup>81</sup> A more our-region-specific example of a national myth (itself a highly-reified type of *topos*) is mobilized by Baku in Iran–Azerbaijan relations—the national myth of Azerbaijan as a ‘partitioned nation’.

While *topoi* are among the most common linguistic tools used in support of a given discursive strategy, many others permeate political and cultural discourse. The category of a ‘rhetorical figure’ includes metonymy, synecdoche, hyperbole, euphemism, metaphor, personification and the use of the deictic ‘we’. Another cluster of specific linguistic realizations of discursive strategies are types of cognitive representation: ‘frames’, ‘schemes’ and ‘scripts’. An example of specifically a ‘strategic script’ in Baku would be the idea of ‘keeping Iran at an arm’s length’. The category of

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<sup>79</sup> See Wodak, Ruth; de Cillia, Rudolf; Reisigl, Martin; Liebhart, Karin. *The Discursive Construction of National Identity*. Edinburgh University Press. 1999.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 165.

linguistic tools also includes ‘evaluative attributions’—either negative or positive—attributions of blame or responsibility, logical fallacies, counterfactuals and constructions of threat. The last discursive strategy and linguistic means of realizing the latter is the discursive construction of the ‘in-group’ and of the ‘out-group’.<sup>82</sup> Looking at interviews with Uzbekistan’s national elite, it appears clear that Afghanistan is increasingly included in the conceptual category of being ‘of the region’, while Iran has been consistently excluded from this category, finding itself conceptually ‘equidistant’ *vis-à-vis* Central Asia alongside Pakistan, the ‘other second-tier regional player’.

As has been already mentioned, the two case studies<sup>83</sup> are of policymaking-and-policy-informing-elite treatment of Iran—and of relations with the latter—in the Republic of Azerbaijan and in the Republic of Uzbekistan. In addition to subjecting this elite-espoused intersubjectivity to discourse analysis, the two cases are also subjected to—in the very last chapter—instruments of the comparative method. Its analytical utility is in accounting for dissimilar outcomes in a context where the bulk of the ‘inputs’ is similar, or at least analogous. Given this similarity—along a multiplicity of axes—of the variables observable in the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Uzbekistan, the choice here is of ‘Most Similar Systems Design’ (MSSD), commonly deployed in small-N (the N being two in this case) comparative study design. The scarce areas of contrast between the Tehran–Baku and the Tehran–Tashkent relationship dyads—generally marked in the former by more fraught relations, by a more conflictual sub-regional landscape, and arguably-closer links of immaterial connectivity such as trans-boundary kinship links and Shia Islam—are highlighted for their explanatory

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<sup>82</sup> See Tekin, Beyza. *Representations and Othering in Discourse: The Construction of Turkey in the EU Context*. John Benjamin’s Publishing Company. 2010: chapter 4: “Representation and Othering in Discourse”: 153-208.

<sup>83</sup> The justification behind the choice of merely two case studies, as well as of the specific country selection, is to be found on pages 6-8.

power (and this would be in contrast to a ‘Most Different Systems Design’ small-N layout where the overlap of key variables between two or more case studies is minimal, these independent variables being singled out for their explanatory power instead).<sup>84</sup>

## Conclusion

To close this introductory chapter, it can be asserted that the intersubjective dimension of the Iran–Central Eurasia regional dynamic is the chief focus of this piece of research. This is, in many a way, favoured both by the chosen theoretical framework and by the research methodology. At a time when the most substantial factor invigorating this regional dynamic has been the proliferation of overland-connectivity initiatives—obviously material phenomena in nature—this material ‘core’ invites us to explore the dialectic between immaterial (intersubjective) forms of regional connectivity and the material ones. After pioneer scholars writing on the very topic of Iran’s relations with the former-Soviet South published in the 1990s, little of the subsequent scholarship—with the odd exception that proves the rule—succeeded in bringing anything new to the picture beyond simple description and enumerations—however valuable—of empirical facts. My contribution to the discipline is therefore to in focusing on key dynamics after the dust of the initial enthusiasm of the 1990s had settled, privileging regional developments that had transpired between the late 2000s and the early 2020s and the state interests and strategic objectives still at play. Aside from the aforementioned periods of fieldwork in the Republic of Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan, I also hope to infuse the empirical points examined with my personal insight informed by my work and study

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<sup>84</sup> Halperin, Sandra; Heath, Oliver. *Political Research: Methods and Practical Skills* (3rd edition). Oxford University Press, 2020: 234-238.

periods living in Tajikistan and Iran respectively in 2016. An invitation for future scholarship to venture further down comparative regional avenues is extended at the dissertation's end.

## **Chapter 2: An Overview of Iran–Central Eurasia Relations**

Before the examination of case studies of two select Iran–Central-Eurasian-republic dyads in the two chapters that come after this one, it is worthwhile to present a general overview of the Iran–Central Eurasia regional constellation. The first section of this chapter looks at the historical roots of immaterial connectivity linking the sub-regions, as well as at the first decade-or-so of post-USSR-collapse efforts to promote material connectivity and build closer bilateral and multilateral relations. The second section examines the key milestones and breakthroughs in the proliferation of Iran–Central Eurasia connectivity in the more recent past, both in terms of now-settled points on the regional agenda, as well as in terms of the biggest ‘game-changers’ that are in the process of fundamentally altering the regional *status quo*. The third section of this chapter looks at both the material and the intersubjective dimensions of foreign policymaking in Tehran *vis-à-vis* Central Eurasia. This chapter closes with a fourth section, which examines the role—in the context of the post-Soviet republics’ respective ongoing nationbuilding processes—of the aforementioned immaterial connectivity with Iran, in ways that are relevant to the topic at large. The broader objective of this chapter is to introduce key datapoints, as well as to provide the necessary background context for the topics covered subsequently, when analysing concrete fieldwork material.

### **I) The historical roots of material and immaterial connectivity**

#### *A) Coexistence within the same polities and division between rival states*

As has been said in the introductory chapter, it is the direct result of the 19<sup>th</sup> century expansion of the Tsarist empire and—over the course of the following century—

Moscow-led efforts to create *Homo Sovieticus* that the South Caucasus and Central Asia are no longer seen as part of the same contiguous, culturally-defined macro-region (analogous to ‘Latin America’ or ‘East Asia’) as Iran and the rest of the Middle East’s ‘Northern Tier’.<sup>85</sup> This bygone ‘civilizational coherence’ had been one that transcended the oscillation between periods of political unity and those of political fragmentation. The prevailing historical trend had nevertheless followed a recurring pattern: whenever the Iranian plateau found itself politically unified with the demographic core of Central Asia (i.e. the lowlands of the upper Amu Darya, the Fergana and the Zarafshan valleys and, to a lesser extent, Khorezm) under the same dynastic polity, at least since the decline of the authority of the Abbasids, Iran would be the one ruled from Transoxiana (*Mā warā’ an-Nahr*), rather than the other way around. The most emblematic cases had been the Khwarazmian and the early-Timurid empires. The latter polities, together with dynastic polities which territorially coincided with ‘Greater Khorasan’, but nothing beyond—such as the Samanids—or, conversely, those which occupied the vast majority of the Iranian plateau with the conspicuous exception of the aforementioned Khorasan—such as the Aq Qoyunlu under Uzun Hasan—are generally excluded in modern-day Iranian historiography from the mental list of precursors to the modern-day Iranian state. Conversely, the South Caucasus (more specifically the Kura-Aras basin, which accounts for the bulk of the modern-day Republic of Azerbaijan, all of contemporary Armenia, and the eastern half of Georgia) would be more consistently subsumed under the same series of dynastic polities as the bulk of the Iranian plateau, with the political power-centres near-universally located within the latter topographic feature. In said periods of the South Caucasus (plus Dagestan) being a mere

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<sup>85</sup> See introduction to Menashri, David (Ed.) *Central Asia Meets the Middle East*. London; Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1998.



‘northwestern political appendix’ of the Iranian plateau—be it under the Sassanids, the Saljuqs, the Ilkhanids, or the Safavids—a rival centre of political power would consolidate in the northeast, across the Amu Darya, be it, correspondingly, the Hephthalites, the early Karakhanids, the Chagatai Khanate, or the Abu’l Khayrid-Shaybanid Uzbeks.<sup>86</sup>

### *B) The role of geography*

The constraints of geography also tended to determine the main overland trade and logistical supply routes—some of which are only now being replicated in the framework of the new and ongoing proliferation of material connectivity—that traverse the discussed macro-region. After the ‘internal’ obstacle of Great Salt Desert (*Dašt-e Kavīr*), which explains some divergent historical and linguistic trajectories between Khorasan and the rest of Iran, the next traditional obstacle has been the Karakum desert, which roughly coincides with the bulk of modern-day Turkmenistan. To link the population centres of the Iranian plateau with the aforementioned ones in Transoxiana, traders and emissaries could join caravans moving between what is now the Razavi Khorasan province of Iran and the city of Bukhara, via the Merv oasis. Alternatively, they could reach Khorezm—located in the delta of the Amu Darya—from the Gorgan region, along the foothills of the Kopet Dag mountains and onwards through the western edge of the Karakum—likely along the now-extinct Amu river distributary that used to flow into the Caspian. These are also the very same two points where Iran’s railway network has linked up with the Soviet-era-inherited one of Central Asia in 1996 and 2014 respectively (see Figure n.5). Due to analogous constraints of topography,

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<sup>86</sup> See De Blois, François. “The Concept of Iran in Zoroastrian and Other Traditions”. The 19th Kutar Memorial Lecture, SOAS, London 21 April 2016. URL: [www.academia.edu/28561291/The\\_concept\\_of\\_Iran\\_in\\_Zoroastrian\\_and\\_other\\_traditions](http://www.academia.edu/28561291/The_concept_of_Iran_in_Zoroastrian_and_other_traditions)

there has also only been a small handful of points where the travellers could cross from Transoxiana into (what in nowadays) China, given the massive obstacle of the Tian Shan and the Pamir mountains. From southwest to northeast (and generally in descending order of difficulty), there is the Wakhan corridor, the Kulma Pass, the Irkeshtam Pass, the Torugart Pass (all four eventually leading down to the Tarim basin), the upper-Ili river valley and the so-called Dzungarian Gate—both leading down to the Dzungarian basin. The last but one of the mentioned chokepoints is nowadays known as Khorgos, while the latter is also known in Mandarin as the *Ālāshānkǒu*. All of these Silk Road pathways eventually funnel into the *Héxī* Corridor in Gansu to reach China's 'heartland'. While seemingly not as relevant for Iran–Central Eurasia material connectivity, much of China's overland trade using Iran and Central Asia for transit, unless using the Caspian-traversing multimodal 'Middle Corridor' (which has been conceived with the goal of circumventing both Russia and Iran),<sup>87</sup> nonetheless use either one or the other of the aforementioned historical routes and chokepoints. The western portion of the latter corridor, centred on the lowlands of the South Caucasus, also copies large segments of the historical trade routes in place between the Iranian plateau and Europe, either to eventually traverse the Black Sea from one the ports of what is nowadays Georgian territory, or to continue overland via Anatolia. The nearby Armenian highlands could also be historically reached from northwestern Iran by ascending the Aras River Valley, a real option in terms of rail transport for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century until the Karabakh conflict would break the link in 1991. As a consequence, at least until an agreement on a 'Zangezur corridor' is reached between

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<sup>87</sup> Shepard, Wade. "How Azerbaijan, Georgia, And Turkey Subverted Russia And Isolated Armenia With New Railway". *Forbes*, October 30, 2017. URL: [www.forbes.com/sites/wadeshepard/2017/10/30/new-silk-road-azerbaijan-georgia-and-turkey-unite-over-new-rail-line-armenia-further-isolated/?sh=3194ecf63aff](http://www.forbes.com/sites/wadeshepard/2017/10/30/new-silk-road-azerbaijan-georgia-and-turkey-unite-over-new-rail-line-armenia-further-isolated/?sh=3194ecf63aff)

Baku and Yerevan, the former needs to traverse Iranian territory to supply its own Nakhchivan exclave, all while the latter needs to navigate the rugged topography of the Lesser Caucasus to link its Iranian-border-adjacent Syunik region (Zangezur in Azerbaijani Turkish) with Armenia's demographic and economic core in the northwest. For north–south connectivity, the Greater Caucasus would either be historically circumvented via the choke-point of Derbent in the east, or traversed through its rough midpoint at the *Dar-i Alān* gorge (also known as the Darial Pass) onward to the Pontic–Caspian steppe. In short, the constraints of geographical obstacles have been a constant in the equation of Iran–Central Eurasia material and immaterial connectivity for all of recorded history.

### *C) Finer distinctions of historical roles within Central Eurasia*

While Greater Khorasan and Transoxiana had likely played a key role in the genesis of Zoroastrianism—as well as that of the New Persian language some two millennia later—the South Caucasus and the adjacent areas of northwestern Iran<sup>88</sup> were the diffusion point from which Twelver Shiism was spread to the rest of Iran in the early 1500s,<sup>89</sup> as well as the main point of transmission of European modernity—generally via Russian mediation—to the Iranian plateau three-four centuries later. Central Eurasia therefore played a key role in the shift of Iran's 'cultural centre of gravity' from the northeast to the northwest over the course of the past millennium.<sup>90</sup> The last time Iran and Transoxiana would be subsumed under the same dynastic polity for any extended

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<sup>88</sup> The millenarian '*ghulāt*' *Ṣafawiyya* order had been based in Ardabil.

<sup>89</sup> The Safavids nevertheless also relied on the legitimacy of 'orthodox' Twelver Shia clerics summoned from territories corresponding to modern-day Lebanon, Bahrain, and the Qatif region of Saudi Arabia.

<sup>90</sup> In the two millennia prior, there had been two instances of analogous shifts of the 'centre of cultural gravity of Iranian civilization', on those occasions from the southwest (*Pārs* and Mesopotamia) to the northeast (Parthia, Bactria and Sogdiana) after the fall of the Achaemenids and, again, after the fall of the Sasanians respectively.

period of time would be under the early Timurids of the late-14<sup>th</sup> and early-15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>91</sup> The South Caucasus (corresponding to the modern-day territories of the republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan, of eastern Georgia and southern Dagestan) would only exit Iran's geopolitical orbit in a lasting fashion after military defeats incurred by the latter from Tsarist Russia and cemented in the 1813 Gulistan and the 1828 Turkmenchay treaties. This would in effect encourage the flow of ideas and technology between native peoples on both sides of the border, as exemplified by the diffusion of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century works of Tiflis-based Mirzā Faṭḥ-‘Alī Āḥundzāde. The easy spread of ideas and technology from the northwest also explains why Tabriz became the epicentre of the Constitutional movement of the first decade of the 1900s. Further intellectual foment had ultimately also been downstream from the migration of labourers from Iranian Azerbaijan in response to the economic bonanza resulting from the exploitation of the oilfields in and around Baku around the same time.<sup>92</sup> The ‘father of Baku-Azerbaijani statehood’ Mahammad Amin Rasulzade had been, in his youth, the editor-in-chief of the *Īrān-e Now* mouthpiece of the Democratic Party of Iran and an active participant in the later stages of said Constitutional Revolution.<sup>93</sup>

Aside from joint involvement in Iran alongside Britain in 1911 to aid the Qajars with quelling the Constitutional Revolution, as well as during World War I, followed by an outright joint occupation during World War II, Russian and subsequently Soviet

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<sup>91</sup> With their imperial capital moving from Samarqand (in Transoxiana) to Herat (in the very heart of Khorasan) and with the associated cultural flourishing of the so-called Timurid Renaissance, the aforementioned westward shift was reversed for a brief moment.

See Zeidan, Adam. “Timurid dynasty”. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. URL: [www.britannica.com/topic/Timurid-dynasty](http://www.britannica.com/topic/Timurid-dynasty)

<sup>92</sup> Afary, Janet. “Ejtemā’iūn, Ferqa-ye”. *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 1998. URL: [iranicaonline.org/articles/ejtemaiun](http://iranicaonline.org/articles/ejtemaiun)

<sup>93</sup> Parvin, Nassereddin. “Īrān-e Now”. *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 2012. URL: [iranicaonline.org/articles/iran-e-now](http://iranicaonline.org/articles/iran-e-now)

Active participants in the Constitutional Revolution originally hailing from the northern side of the Aras also include the Armenian political leader Yeprem Khan Davutian.

activity in Iran's northwest had culminated in the mid-1940s, when two Soviet puppet quasi-states were set up in the autumn of 1945 in Mahabad and Tabriz respectively. Unsurprisingly, in the latter case, educational and administrative resources and manpower were supplied from Soviet Azerbaijan. With the defeat of the two secessionist polities, the 'Kurdish Republic of Mahabad' and the 'Azerbaijan People's Government' by the central government at the end of 1946, the leader of the latter Ja'far Pischevari and his allies flee to Soviet Azerbaijan.<sup>94</sup> The political, intellectual and demographic flux between Iran and Soviet-controlled Central Asia was minimal in comparison to the South Caucasus, a prominent exception being the Khorasan-born Iranian-Armenian 'father of Iranian cinema' Ovanes Ohanian—trained in Tashkent, Ashgabat and Moscow<sup>95</sup>—as well as the contribution of the Kermanshah native Abolqāsem Lahūtī to the fledgling Soviet republic of Tajikistan, including the authorship of the national anthem.<sup>96</sup> I can also anecdotally attest a presence of a handful of citizens of Tajikistan whose Iranian *Bahā'ī* grandparents left for the Soviet Union—initially Soviet Turkmenistan—eventually settling in Dushanbe.<sup>97</sup> Two years before the Soviet collapse, on the last day of 1989, a rather symbolic incident took place when crowds of Soviet Azerbaijani citizens tore down physical barriers at various border posts in Nakhchivan, ostensibly to be able to visit kin on the Iranian side of the border.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Therme, Clément. "Iranian Foreign Policy towards the South Caucasus: Between Revolutionary Ideals and Realpolitik" in Jafalian, Annie (Ed.) *Reassessing Security in the South Caucasus: Regional Conflicts and Transformation*. Routledge. 2011: 8.

See Atabaki, Touraj. *Azerbaijan: Ethnicity and the Struggle for Power in Iran*, London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2000.

<sup>95</sup> Permanent exhibit of the *Mūze-ye Sīnamā-ye Īrān* [Cinema Museum of Iran], Tehran, autumn 2016.

<sup>96</sup> 'Ābedi, Kāmyār. "Lahuti, Abu'l-Qasem". *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 2009. URL: [iranicaonline.org/articles/lahuti-abul-qasem](http://iranicaonline.org/articles/lahuti-abul-qasem)

Foltz, Richard. *A History of the Tajiks: Iranians of the East*. I.B. Tauris. 2019: 132-133.

<sup>97</sup> Dushanbe, Tajikistan, spring 2016

<sup>98</sup> Cornell, Svante. *Azerbaijan since Independence*. Routledge. 2010: chapter 12.

The collapse of the USSR itself caught foreign-policy decisionmakers in Tehran unprepared—merely responding in an *ad hoc* fashion to the new geopolitical reality that had just been ‘thrust upon them’. This would set the overall tone of Iran’s policy—namely reactive, rather than proactive—towards Central Eurasia for decades to come.<sup>99</sup> By contrast, the complete initial preoccupation with perceived security threats emanating from the ‘former Soviet South’, the associated fear of conflict spillover and the securitization of the entire ‘northern vector’ of the foreign-policy agenda had merely been a passing phenomenon—albeit one informing Tehran’s resolve to mediate the conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh and in Tajikistan.<sup>100</sup> A similar initial bone of contention had also been the extreme distrust of Iran felt by the Soviet-educated staunchly-secular elite of the South Caucasus and Central Asia.<sup>101</sup> The sole brief period of ‘existential’, deeper-level animosity has been under the presidency of the ethnonationalist Abulfaz Elchibey in Baku from mid-1992 until mid-1993, when he was swept from power by a *coup d’état*, one which to this day is linked to supposed Russo-Iranian collusion in the minds of more conspiratorially-minded Baku-Azerbaijanis.<sup>102</sup> Yet even under Elchibey’s tenure did the bureaucratic apparatus periodically go into ‘damage control mode’ every time an inflammatory anti-Iran statement had been uttered by the former, as Baku could scarcely afford to have its sole genuine access- and supply-route to the

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<sup>99</sup> See Dorraj, Manochehr; Entessar, Nader. “Iran’s Northern Exposure: Foreign Policy Challenges in Eurasia”. Occasional Paper No. 13 for Center for International and Regional Studies, Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar. 2013.

<sup>100</sup> See Herzig, Edmund. *Iran and the Former Soviet South*. Chatham House, 1995.

<sup>101</sup> Kozhanov, Nikolay. *Iran’s Strategic Thinking: The Evolution of Iran’s Foreign Policy, 1979-2018*. Gerlach Press. Berlin, Germany. 2018: 78.

<sup>102</sup> Cornell, Svante, “Iran: a reluctant neighbour”. in Cornell, Svante (Ed.) *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*, Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2001: 314.

Nakhchivan exclave cut by Tehran,<sup>103</sup> implying an early instance of asymmetric economic interdependence in the Iran–Central Eurasia equation.

The first years of consolidating bilateral relations between Iran and the newly-independent—or, alternatively, ‘freshly recovering their independence’, as had been the case of Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan which all had a taste of modern statehood between 1918 and 1920—republics of Central Eurasia also coincided with the expansion of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) to include specifically the Muslim-majority subset of post-Soviet Central Eurasia, as well as Afghanistan.<sup>104</sup> Both its resuscitation in the mid-1980s (from the dissolved-in-1979 Baghdad Pact’s Organization for Regional Cooperation and Development) and its aforementioned enlargement had been Tehran’s initiative. This together with the fact that ECO’s general secretariat is located in Tehran has been a source of pride among Iran’s policymaking elite,<sup>105</sup> which contrast starkly with ECO being largely ignored by the elites in the remainder of the member states, as shown in the subsequent two chapters. The reason why the organization has not lived up to the hopes of its founders is, at least in part, the international isolation of Iran itself, i.e. the geographic cornerstone and the politically-central player within ECO.<sup>106</sup> A compounding factor has been fundamental disagreements over the actual purpose of the organization. Uzbekistan’s late president

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<sup>103</sup> Hunter, Shireen T. “Iran and Transcaucasia in the post-Soviet era”. in Menashri, David (Ed.) *Central Asia Meets the Middle East*. London; Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1998: 117.

<sup>104</sup> Iran’s determination to enlarge ECO—a rare instance of the Islamic Republic pushing for multilateralism in the region, rather than Iran’s preferred cultivation of bilateral ties—can be framed as yet another instance of Tehran merely reacting to wider regional developments, as a reaction to Turkey’s speedy unilateral overtures *vis-à-vis* post-Soviet Central Asia.

See Wastnidge, Edward. *Diplomacy and Reform in Iran: Foreign Policy under Khatami*. I.B.Tauris. 2016: 18, 109.

<sup>105</sup> Kozhanov, Nikolay. *Iran’s Strategic Thinking: The Evolution of Iran’s Foreign Policy, 1979-2018*. Gerlach Press. Berlin, Germany. 2018: 15.

<sup>106</sup> Echeverría, Carlos Jesús. “Estrategias en el Cáucaso y Asia central” [Strategies in the Caucasus and Central Asia]. *Política Exterior*, 14(75) 2000: 99-106, 109-113.

A case can nonetheless be made that ECO’s utility continues as a *de facto* confidence-building mechanism, periodically bringing regional heads of state together during biennial summits.

Islam Karimov is on the record threatening to withdraw from the organization, should Iran ‘continue to politicize the agenda’.<sup>107</sup> Furthermore Karimov is described as having had been the biggest obstacle to any advanced regionalism taking root even in Uzbekistan’s own sub-region of Central Asia.<sup>108</sup>

It was disparate degrees of pre-existing immaterial connectivity that also determined the tone, from their very onset, of bilateral relations between Tehran and the respective Central Eurasian capitals. There appears to be no direct correlation between, for instance, the volume of trade and the proximity of cultural links.<sup>109</sup> Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Armenia have been in various periods following independence major trade partners of Iran, yet the salience of their historical and cultural links with Iran are inferior to those that the Republic of Azerbaijan and Tajikistan have. Paradoxically in case of the countries where traditional tribal organization and nomadism—as had been the case with the Turkmen and with the Kipchaks (i.e. the Kazakh and Kyrgyz) of Central Asia—as well in contexts where an identity-defining affiliation with a Christian denomination—as is traditionally the case of the Armenians<sup>110</sup> and Georgians in the South Caucasus—prevented a deeper integration into Persianate elite culture (however many centuries some of the above may have lived inside a dynastic polity ruled from the Iranian plateau) contemporary relations with Iran have generally been less fraught.

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<sup>107</sup> Herzig, Edmund. “Regionalism, Iran and Central Asia”. *International Affairs*, 80(3) 2004: 507.

<sup>108</sup> See Bohr, Annette. “Regionalism in Central Asia: new geopolitics, old regional order”. *International Affairs*, 80(3) 2004: 485-502.

The biggest ‘spoilers’ of greater multilateral cooperation in Central Asia are currently Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, more so than ‘perpetually neutral’ Turkmenistan.

<sup>109</sup> Geographical proximity and complementary non-rivaling economic sectors have generally been more predictive.

<sup>110</sup> The salience of deep historical links that Armenia has maintained with Iranian plateau is otherwise considerable. To begin with, the Armenian language has been so deeply influenced by Parthian that Western linguist initially considered Armenian to be an Indo-Iranian language. In the past half-millennium, there has been the factor of the influential (Julfa-)Armenian diaspora, as well as in the very fact that main dialectal divergence of Armenian stemmed from the political division of Armenian-speaking lands. Western Armenian coincided with Ottoman-controlled lands while Eastern Armenian corresponds to once-Iran-controlled territories.



In these cases, economic considerations and *Realpolitik* prevail. An instance of this dynamic is brought up by Dilip Hiro in his monograph, citing the deputy editor of Evening Ashgabat whom he interviewed in the autumn of 1992: “We have lived with the Iranians for the past two thousand years without being dominated by them [...] We can live with them much longer and maintain our identity.”<sup>111</sup> On the Iranian side of the equation, former deputy foreign minister Abbas Maleki is on the record conceding that the aforementioned religious factors ensure that Armenia ‘will never be receptive to Iran’s ‘Iranian-Islamic-civilization-based’ messaging’.<sup>112</sup>

#### *D) Deference to Russia and constraints imposed by the West*

Material connectivity between Tehran and Yerevan has also been an area where Iran’s near-universal deference to the Russian Federation has been on full display.<sup>113</sup> The Russian Federation has effectively vetoed plans for an oil refinery to be built by Iran in Armenia in the mid-2000s, Yerevan ultimately giving the project to Russia instead.<sup>114</sup> Around the same time, with Moscow seeking to preserve its privileged position as Armenia’s primary gas supplier, pressure by the Kremlin had, in all likelihood, led to the reduction of the diameter from the originally-envisioned 1420mm to 700mm—therefore also reducing the carrying capacity—of the Iran–Armenia gas pipeline.<sup>115</sup> The

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<sup>111</sup> Dilip, Hiro. *Inside Central Asia: A Political and Cultural History of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkey, and Iran*. Overlook Duckworth, Peter Mayer Publishers, Inc. New York & London. 2009: 378.

<sup>112</sup> Akbarzadeh, Shahrām; Barry, James. “State Identity in Iranian Foreign Policy”. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 43(4) 2016: 621.

<sup>113</sup> The main rationale behind this deference has been, among other factors, the Russian Federation’s traditional standing as Iran’s main arms supplier. See Wastnidge, Edward. *Diplomacy and Reform in Iran: Foreign Policy under Khatami*. I.B.Tauris. 2016: 17.

<sup>114</sup> Atai, Farhad. “The Dynamics of Bilateral Relations in the South Caucasus: Iran and its North Neighbors”. *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, 7(3) 2009: 115-128.

<sup>115</sup> Therme, Clément. “Iranian Foreign Policy towards the South Caucasus: Between Revolutionary Ideals and Realpolitik”. Conference paper 2011: 6.

situation in the Caspian basin and in Central Asia is analogous, but there are fewer instances of directly-competing interests between Tehran and Moscow and therefore fewer opportunities for the former's deference to the latter to fully manifest. For instance, despite supporting opposing factions, it was thanks to joint Russo-Iranian mediation efforts that the civil war in Tajikistan was brought to an end in 1997. Furthermore, there is an alignment between both countries in their determination to not see any trans-Caspian gas pipeline project come to fruition.<sup>116</sup> Last, but not least, the fact of Iran–Central Asia relations being—at least in part—a function of the Tehran–Moscow relationship also puts Iran's ideological commitments into question. War crimes in Chechnya having had been deemed 'Russia's own private internal matter'—used as evidence of Tehran's 'cynical pragmatism'—contrasts with the relative liberty indulged by Iranian representatives when issuing statements on Baku's ostensibly poor treatment of the more-religiously-devout subsections of Azerbaijan's Shia Muslim majority.<sup>117</sup>

The imperative sensed in the capitals of the republics of post-Soviet Central Eurasia not to alienate Washington—and the West more broadly—by their dealings with Tehran had shifted from being a major factor at the onset of official relations to gradually losing all major relevance over the subsequent decades. The National Iranian Oil Company's (NIOC) 20 percent share in the exploitation of Azerbaijan's offshore

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Sadri, Houman A. "Iran and the Caucasus States in the 21st Century: A Study of Foreign Policy Goals and Means". *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 14(3) 2012: 392.

<sup>116</sup> Therme, Clément. "When Tehran Looks at its Regional Environment: Iranian think tanks and their analysis of Central Asia", *Iran Regional Forum* paper no 2, November 2012: 8-9.

<sup>117</sup> Rocca, Noemi Maria, "Regional Stability for National Survival: Iran's Foreign Policy Towards the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia in the Post-Soviet Era". *International Relations and Diplomacy*, 5(9) 2017: 545-546.

See Pakaein, Mohsen. *Čahār sāl-e ān sū-ye Aras: Hāṭerāt-e Mohsen-e Pāk-āyīn (Dowrān-e sefārat dar Jomhūrī-ye Āzarbāyjān)* [Four Years on the Other Side of the Aras: Recollections of Mohsen Pakaein (The Period at the Embassy in the Republic of Azerbaijan)] Oral History Unit, Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS) Tehran, 2019

Azeri-Chirag-Guneshli oil field, as part of the international consortium dubbed the ‘Contract of the Century’ signed in the autumn of 1994—informally in exchange for new logistical provisioning for the Nakhchivan exclave—came to a premature end in the spring of 1995, due to Washington’s pressure on Baku.<sup>118</sup> A year later, however, Baku promised to grant the very same NIOC with a ten percent share in exploitation of the offshore Shah Deniz natural gas field, this time a scheme devoid of any US shareholders. This inclusion was in all likelihood an olive branch extended by the Baku leadership in compensation for the aforementioned ejection.<sup>119</sup> US pressures nevertheless continue to be a singular obstacle to the financial backing and realization of any pipeline projects on Iranian soil that would pursue the transit of Caspian gas or oil onward via Anatolia or via the Persian Gulf respectively,<sup>120</sup> indicating the inherently greater susceptibility of energy pipelines over roads and rail to international coercion of a financial nature. The contentious issue of Caspian energy resources—compounded by the absent-at-the-time legal regime regulating the use of the Caspian Sea resources—also led to military escalation, with an Iranian warship escorting a Baku-Azerbaijani exploration vessel from disputed waters in the summer of 2001.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Sadegh-Zadeh, Kaweh. “Iran’s Strategy in the South Caucasus”. *Caucasus Review of International Affairs*, 2(1) 2008: 38-39.

Herzig, Edmund. *Iran and the Former Soviet South*. Chatham House, 1995: 41.

<sup>119</sup> Koolae, Elaheh; Hafezian, Mohammad Hossein. “The Islamic Republic of Iran and the South Caucasus Republics”. *Iranian Studies*, 43(3) 2010: 400.

Kouhi-Esfahani, Marzieh. *Iran’s Foreign Policy in the South Caucasus*. Routledge. 2019: 140-141.

<sup>120</sup> Mahmudlu, Ceyhun; Shin, Sang Yoon. “Strategic Cooperation of Iran at the Regional Level: Enduring Sanctions and Reviving the Oil and Gas Industry”. *International Journal of Diplomacy and Economy*, 8(2) 2022: 200.

See Yuldasheva, Guli. *Geopolitičeskie protsessy v sovremennoĭ tsentral’noĭ Azii: Iran i SŠA* [Geopolitical Processes in Contemporary Central Asia: Iran and the US]. Latvian Institute of International Affairs, Riga. 2017.

<sup>121</sup> Ismailzade, Fariz. “A breakthrough in Iran-Azerbaijan relations?” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*. February 19<sup>th</sup>, 2016. URL: [www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13330-a-breakthrough-in-iran-azerbaijan-relations?.html](http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13330-a-breakthrough-in-iran-azerbaijan-relations?.html)

*E) Multiplicity of endogenous regional actors*

When discussing the historical background of contemporary Iran–Central Eurasia relations, there is a multiplicity of actors—namely eight sovereign nation-states—on the post-Soviet side of the equation. This seemingly contrasts with the presence of a singular actor of the other side of the equation. This idea nonetheless needs some further qualification, as the foreign-policy decisionmaking process in Tehran is notoriously factionalized. Aside from ministries, government agencies etcetera, semi-official actors in Iran also play a role. Specifically in the case of Iran’s relations with Central Asia, the Mashhad-based *Āstān-e Qods-e Rażavī* religious charitable foundation (*bonyād* in Persian), closely linked to the Khorasani branch of the IRGC, has a track record of soft power engagement with various Central Asian republics, such as a the 2008 SCO-themed conference organized by the *bonyād* on the shores of the lake Issyk-Kul in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>122</sup> Regional engagement with South Caucasian and Central Asian counterparts had also been taking shape on the side of individual Iranian provinces. As is shown in more depth in the third section of this chapter, this has been the case with virtually all land-border-adjacent as well as the Caspian-bordering provinces of the north of Iran.

Since the semi-formalization of Iran’s foreign-policy attitudes *vis-à-vis* its northern, post-Soviet neighbourhood coincided with the Islamic Republic’s conspicuous shift towards greater pragmatism and away from propagating its revolutionary model

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<sup>122</sup> Peyrouse, Sébastien; Ibraimov, Sadykzhan. “Iran’s Central Asia Temptations”. Hudson Institute. 2014: 94.

Academic research on the *Āstān*’s economic activity in Central Asia is non-existent, but the latter is likely substantial.

abroad under then-president Hashemi-Rafsanjani,<sup>123</sup> the broad strokes have remained stable under all subsequent administrations. Khatami's presidency had effectively been a culmination of Iran's trajectory towards ever-greater use of cultural messaging in Tehran's foreign policy, yet the main interlocutors within the framework of the latter's 'Dialogue of Civilizations' were Iran's main trade partners in Europe and East Asia, rather than immediate neighbours.<sup>124</sup> Despite scholarly emphasis on his presidency ostensibly marking a rupture from Khatami, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad nevertheless continued to base Iran's foreign-policy conduct on cultural overtures, the culmination being the introduction of the *sui generis* format of regular trilateral summits of the heads of the three Persian-speaking states of Iran, Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Ahmadinejad likewise turned the shared regional tradition of celebrating Nowruz into a positive-sum flagship of Iran's cultural diplomacy *vis-à-vis* Central Eurasia, as well as on the grounds of the United Nations.<sup>125</sup> The aforementioned presidency also marked a rebalancing towards Asian partners, a pivot now reportedly in the process of being replicated under Ebrahim Raisi.<sup>126</sup> It needs to be acknowledged that reformist

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<sup>123</sup> Sajjadpour, Seyed Kazem. "Iran, the Caucasus and Central Asia" in Banuazizi, Ali; Meiner, Myron (Eds.) *The New Geopolitics of Central Asia and Its Borderlands*. I.B. Tauris, London. 1994: 199-200.

It needs to be emphasized how Iran had, at that historical juncture, just recently exited a protracted war with Baathist Iraq and mourned the death of Ayatollah Khomeini. The overarching goal of Hashemi-Rafsanjani's presidential administration was to rebuild the country and save its fledgling economy. Normalizing diplomatic relations with nearby countries, as well as those with countries further afield, was seen as an unavoidable step in achieving such goals.

<sup>124</sup> Herzig, Edmund. "Regionalism, Iran and Central Asia". *International Affairs*, 80(3) 2004: 511.

See Wastnidge, Edward. *Diplomacy and Reform in Iran: Foreign Policy under Khatami*. I.B.Tauris. 2016.

A similar, but even more one-sidedly West-oriented, policy, one neglectful of Iran's immediate northern neighbourhood, had been replicated later under Hassan Rouhani.

See Şen, Gülriz. "After the Nuclear Deal: Opportunities and Challenges of Iran's Reintegration". *İraniyat Dergisi/Journal of Iranian Studies*. 2017: 86.

The latter also shelved efforts to push more assertively for Iran's SCO membership.

See Kozhanov, Nikolay. *Iran's Strategic Thinking: The Evolution of Iran's Foreign Policy, 1979-2018*. Gerlach Press. Berlin, Germany. 2018: 142.

<sup>125</sup> Wastnidge, Edward. "The Modalities of Iranian Soft Power: From Cultural Diplomacy to Soft War". *Politics*. 2014: 7.

<sup>126</sup> "Iran's Golden Period in Eurasia Beginning: Expert." *IRNA*, June 21, 2022. URL: [en.irna.ir/news/84796067/Iran-s-golden-period-in-Eurasia-beginning-Expert](https://en.irna.ir/news/84796067/Iran-s-golden-period-in-Eurasia-beginning-Expert)

presidential administrations have generally had their hands tied to a greater degree, as their relatively-free reign within agendas pertaining to the former Soviet space, but also *vis-à-vis* regional trade partners such as Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government, as well as Dubai—and the United Arab Emirates more broadly—contrasts starkly with regional agendas largely-monopolized by the Supreme Leader and the IRGC which pertain to more securitized regions in Iran's neighbourhood, such as the rest of Iraq, to Syria and Yemen.<sup>127</sup>

*F) Strategic axes and regional triads*

It was inevitable, virtually from the moment of USSR's collapse, that the proliferation of new state-actors would lead to unofficial rival strategic groupings forming in pursuit of shared interests in Eurasia. While Central Asia has been largely spared these divisions, the South Caucasus is divided—at least on strategic and security matters—between, on the one hand, NATO-allied Georgia and the Republic of Azerbaijan and, on the other hand, Russia-allied Armenia. In the immediate vicinity of the sub-region, there is Turkey, Baku's staunchest ally. The GUAM regional grouping (consisting of the two larger South Caucasian republics, in addition to Ukraine, Moldova and—just for some time before withdrawing—Uzbekistan) is a reflection of this pro-Western bloc. Israel occasionally also takes part in the political and economic affairs of the region on this side. Armenia, modern Azerbaijan's main adversary, has been an unwavering ally of the Russian Federation. It has also maintained close relations with Iran.<sup>128</sup> In geographical terms, there is therefore a north–south strategic axis, which is generally aligned with

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<sup>127</sup> Golmohammadi, Vali. "The Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Prospects for Change and Continuity". *All Azimuth*, 8(1) 2019: 99.

<sup>128</sup> Armenia has at times also sought to build closer ties with Greece—Turkey's other traditional rival. These groupings do not necessarily undermine the good relations that Tehran has maintained with regional players such as Georgia and Turkey.

Tehran's long-term interests, facing a rival east–west one, which is opposed to them.<sup>129</sup> The material testament to the latter have been iterations of material east–west connectivity that explicitly sought to sideline Iran and Russia, such as the 1999 Baku–Tbilisi–Supsa oil pipeline, the 2006 Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum gas pipeline, the 2006 Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline, and the 2017 Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway. Circumventing Russia and Iran would also be the main strategic asset of the so-called Zangezur corridor for the Baku–Ankara axis, as the Nakhchivan exclave is the only part of Azerbaijan's territory that borders Turkey.

Strategic regional axes defined by shared long-term interests contrast with regional constellations that are defined by their zero-sum internal dynamic. In the South Caucasus, this has been the case of the Tehran–Baku–Yerevan triad. An improvement of Tehran–Yerevan relations will generally tend to be to the detriment of the Tehran–Baku relationship and *vice versa*. This could very much change, should a sustainable agreement between Yerevan and Baku over the fate of the Artsakh (Karabakh) Armenians, as well as over of the Zangezur corridor,<sup>130</sup> be reached. In Central Asia, a similar triangular dynamic had been at play in the Tehran–Tashkent–Dushanbe direction. Islam Karimov's zero-sum regional-policy approach rendered Tehran an unwilling participant in a geopolitical 'drama triangle'. Whenever Tehran expressed a desire to build closer ties with Persophone Tajikistan in the first decade-or-two after USSR's collapse, Tashkent would make it clear that the only acceptable pathway is one done on the latter's own terms (i.e. respecting Uzbekistan's own hegemonic aspirations in Central Asia). Things came to a head at the end of 2010, when Karimov's opposition to the completion of the *Sangtūda-2* dam and hydroelectric power station in the

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<sup>129</sup> See Hunter, Shireen T. "Chains across Eurasia". *The World Today*, 52(12) 1996: 313-316.

<sup>130</sup> This would justify Tehran strategically pursuing a 'spoiler role' *vis-à-vis* Zangezur.

‘upstream republic’ of Tajikistan by Iran escalated to the degree of denying Iranian lorries headed for Tajikistan access to Uzbekistan’s territory for transit. In retaliation, Iran initially threatened to deny doubly-landlocked Uzbekistan access to Iranian territory—a cotton-export lifeline in the shape of the Bandar Abbas seaport. Ultimately Tehran opted to airlift the equipment instead.<sup>131</sup> This nevertheless exposed an asymmetric economic interdependence intrinsic to Iran–Uzbekistan relations, one not completely unlike the one present in the Iran–Azerbaijan relationship, specifically *vis-à-vis* Iran’s lifeline provided to the Nakhchivan exclave. The diplomatic incident also showed greater willingness by Iranian decisionmakers to alienate major players in Central Eurasia, should it be in the pursuit of a strategic regional objective. This would be at a time when neither Russia nor China had been willing to compromise their relationship with Tashkent in a similar manner.<sup>132</sup>

*G) Material connectivity projects dating back to the Soviet era*

Unlike the bulk of Central Asia, where the deep cleavage between the water-rich ‘upstream republics’ and the water-poor ‘downstream republics’ has traditionally been a source of regional tensions, the waterways flowing into the Caspian basin tended to bring Iran and its respective riparian neighbours closer together in ways that predated the Soviet collapse. Several Irano-Soviet agreements had been signed over the joint construction of hydropower facilities on the Aras River—the waterway flowing between Iran and (what would become independent) Azerbaijan. Some of these projects

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<sup>131</sup> Chaudet, Didier. “Perceived and Real Threats Coming from the South: The Impact of Iran and of the AfPak Region on Post-Soviet Central Asian Security”. *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 14(3) 2012: 348.

<sup>132</sup> Wastnidge, Edward. “Pragmatic Politics: Iran, Central Asia and Cultural Foreign Policy”. *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, 15(4) 2014: 126.



only came to fruition in the independence period<sup>133</sup> and some are still in preliminary stages. The construction of the Chat reservoir on the Atrek River in the Turkmensahra—an idea dating back to the late-Soviet era—has been apparently held indefinitely in the preliminary planning stage between Iran and Turkmenistan,<sup>134</sup> in contrast to the *Dūstī/Dostluk* (‘Friendship’) dam on the Tejen River (*Harīrūd*) in Khorasan, which has been fully operational since 2005.<sup>135</sup> Another connectivity project that had been under discussion since the late-Soviet period has been the nearby Mashhad–Sarakhs–Tejen rail link, which had been agreed on between Hashemi-Rafsanjani and Gorbachev in the summer of 1989, but would take another seven years to carry to fruition due to the uncertainty that accompanied the disintegration of the USSR.<sup>136</sup> Following the disruption stemming from the Karabakh war in the early 1990s, which had effectively cut the 1941 Irano-Soviet rail link in Nakhchivan, the May 1996 ceremonial opening—attended by the heads of state and heads of government of all nine ECO members, as well as of Georgia and Armenia, some fourteen hundred kilometres

<sup>133</sup> Kozhanov, Nikolay. *Iran’s Strategic Thinking: The Evolution of Iran’s Foreign Policy, 1979-2018*. Gerlach Press. Berlin, Germany. 2018: 55-56.

<sup>134</sup> There have been few updates since in mid-2000s

See “Eḥdās-e sad-hā-ye Čāt va Ḥodā-āfarīn dar marz-hā-ye šomāl-e kešvar” [The construction of the Chat and Khoda-afarin dams in the north of the country] *JameJamOnline*, Farvardīn 19<sup>th</sup>, 1383/April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2004. URL: [jamejamonline.ir/fa/news/38960/%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AB-%D8%B3%D8%AF%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-%DA%86%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%88-%D8%AE%D8%AF%D8%A7-%D8%A2%D9%81%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%86-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%B2%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%B4%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84%DB%8C-%DA%A9%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%B1](http://jamejamonline.ir/fa/news/38960/%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AB-%D8%B3%D8%AF%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-%DA%86%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%88-%D8%AE%D8%AF%D8%A7-%D8%A2%D9%81%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%86-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%B2%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%B4%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84%DB%8C-%DA%A9%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%B1)

<sup>135</sup> Eyvazov, Jannatkhan. “Iran’s Security Interests and Geopolitical Activity in Central Eurasia”. *The Caucasus and Globalization: Journal of Social, Political and Economic Studies*, 3(4) 2009: 28-29.

The Harirud, alongside the Murghab, historically ended up as an alluvial fan of the Sarakhs, and the Merv, oasis respectively. The Soviet-era Karakum canal nowadays displaces a portion of their waters—together with superior volumes of water diverted from the Amu Darya—much further northwest, along the entirety of the northern foothills of the Kopet Dag.

<sup>136</sup> Kozhanov, Nikolay. *Iran’s Strategic Thinking: The Evolution of Iran’s Foreign Policy, 1979-2018*. Gerlach Press. Berlin, Germany. 2018: 56.

to the east—would mark a new ‘reintegration’ of Iran’s rail network with the historical Soviet-era one—a historic first for Central Asia.<sup>137</sup>

While nearly all of the above links—or at least their planning stage—can be traced back to the Soviet period, the collapse of the USSR also created a newfound aspiration in the capitals of the newly-independent Iran-bordering republics to link up with the Islamic Republic in ways that had lacked real expediency prior to the political fragmentation of Central Eurasia. The early tangible takeaways may have been modest, yet their main significance was deeply symbolic. Provisional bridges set up in 1992 over the Aras River between Iran and Armenia—as one could no longer use the border crossing in Julfa due to the two territories being on opposite warring sides—and over the Tejen River between Iran and Turkmenistan<sup>138</sup> respectively were followed by permanent bridges erected in their stead, both of which were completed by the mid-1990s. In the former case, this ensured a critical provision lifeline extended from Iran to Armenia, the latter republic having been effectively under a blockade from most other directions. This anomalous wartime state of affairs had also temporarily rendered the Islamic Republic Armenia’s second-largest trade partner and Azerbaijan’s main one.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Dilip, Hiro. *Inside Central Asia: A Political and Cultural History of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkey, and Iran*. Overlook Duckworth, Peter Mayer Publishers, Inc. New York & London. 2009: 382.

Pakaein, Mohsen. *Čahār sāl dar Sarzamīn-e Teymūr: Hāṭerāt-e safīr-e sābeq-e Īrān dar Ozbakestān (1374-1378)* [Four Years in the Land of Tamerlane: Recollections of Iran’s Former Ambassador to Uzbekistan (~1995-1999)] Oral History Unit, Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS) Tehran, 2010: 113-114.

<sup>138</sup> The fact that most of the trade between late-Qajar Iran and the Transcaspian Oblast of the Tsarist Empire and onwards took place through the Qūčān–Ashgabat mountain road may explain why no bridges seem to have had been in place over the Tejen River in Sarakhs—or over the Atrek in the Turkmensahra for that matter—prior to 1992.

See de Planhol, Xavier. “Boundaries ii. With Russia”. *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 2000. URL: [iranicaonline.org/articles/boundaries-ii](http://iranicaonline.org/articles/boundaries-ii)

<sup>139</sup> Therme, Clément. “Iranian Foreign Policy towards the South Caucasus: Between Revolutionary Ideals and Realpolitik”. Conference paper 2011: 5.

Koolae, Elaheh; Hafezian, Mohammad Hossein. “The Islamic Republic of Iran and the South Caucasus Republics”. *Iranian Studies*, 43(3) 2010: 401-403.

## **II) Main milestones and breakthroughs in terms of material and immaterial connectivity**

Given that an overview of the historical relations between Iran and Central Eurasia—including the first decade-or-so of the republics' independence—has been given, it is worthwhile to now highlight the main trends and agenda-points at the more contemporary stage of the very same relations. In the two empirical chapters following this overview chapter, there is a conspicuous absence of certain issues broached in the interviews—pertaining to local elite views of Iran–South Caucasus and Iran–Central Asia relations—despite the fact the very same topics would have had been at the forefront a mere half-decade earlier. This has most notably been the case of the now-largely-resolved issue of the legal delineation of the Caspian Sea, the unilateral military resolution of the key facets of the Armeno-Azerbaijani dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh, the integration of much of Iran's road and rail network with Central Eurasia's Soviet-era one, and Iran's fraught path towards full SCO accession—as well as the related diplomatic spat with Tajikistan over legacies of the latter's civil war.

### *A) Minor stepping stones in terms of material connectivity*

For decades now, Iran has been supplying the Baku-Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhchivan with natural gas via the Salmas–Nakhchivan (a.k.a. Khoy–Julfa) pipeline—further complemented with Iranian electricity supplies—since the mid-2000s formally in exchange for natural gas sent by the Republic of Azerbaijan to Iran via the bidirectional Soviet-era Hajiqabul–Astara pipeline and a fifteen-percent transit commission.<sup>140</sup> Some

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<sup>140</sup> Koolae, Elahé; Hafezian, Mohammad Hossein. “The Islamic Republic of Iran and the South Caucasus Republics”. *Iranian Studies*, 43(3): 2010: 400-401.

of this asymmetric interdependence stemming from the challenges of Azerbaijan's a non-contiguous exclave is projected to be disrupted by Turkey—which does not share a border with the Baku-Azerbaijani 'mainland' but shares a short border with Nakhchivan—with the construction of the İğdır–Nakhchivan gas pipeline.<sup>141</sup> In close proximity to the exclave, Armenian exports of electricity to Iran are met with Iranian gas exports to Armenia.<sup>142</sup> Furthermore, two gas pipelines have been built between Iran and Turkmenistan: the Korpéje–Kordkuy pipeline—inaugurated in 1997<sup>143</sup>—and the Dovletabad–Sarakhs–Khangeran pipeline, completed in 2010.<sup>144</sup> Turkmenistan's gas flowing through the former was supposed to supply the energy-poor and relatively far-flung—at least as far as the national gas grid was concerned up to the 2017 inauguration of the Damghan–Neka domestic pipeline—north and northeast of Iran. Turkmenistan's gas supplies to Iran, which had a track record of getting periodically reduced or cut by Ashgabat in a unilateral fashion due to disputes with Tehran over pricing and payment, now became regulated by a framework of tripartite natural gas swaps signed between Tehran, Baku and Ashgabat in late 2021.<sup>145</sup> Some two-and-a-half decades after the

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Monshipouri, Mahmood. "Pipeline politics in Iran, Turkey and the South Caucasus" in Kamrava, Mehran (Ed.) *The Great Game in West Asia: Iran, Turkey and the South Caucasus*. Oxford University Press, 2016: 61.

<sup>141</sup> Goble, Paul. "Turkish Pipeline to Nakhchivan Shakes up Power Relations in South Caucasus". *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 18(127) August 10, 2021. URL: [jamestown.org/program/turkish-pipeline-to-nakhchivan-shakes-up-power-relations-in-south-caucasus/](http://jamestown.org/program/turkish-pipeline-to-nakhchivan-shakes-up-power-relations-in-south-caucasus/)

<sup>142</sup> Monshipouri, Mahmood. "Pipeline politics in Iran, Turkey and the South Caucasus" in Kamrava, Mehran (Ed.) *The Great Game in West Asia: Iran, Turkey and the South Caucasus*. Oxford University Press, 2016: 61.

<sup>143</sup> Dilip, Hiro. *Inside Central Asia: A Political and Cultural History of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkey, and Iran*. Overlook Duckworth, Peter Mayer Publishers, Inc. New York & London. 2009: 388-391.

The pipeline was intended as the first section of a larger Turkmenistan–Iran gas pipeline, negotiated between the two countries since the mid-1990s, with the projected end-point being Turkish and European energy markets. The full-fledged project never came to fruition due to poor financing capacities of said countries, as well as due to US opposition.

<sup>144</sup> Mesbahi, Mohiaddin. "Eurasia between Russia, Turkey, and Iran", in Freire, Maria Raquel; Kanet, Roger E. (Eds.) *Key Players and Regional Dynamics in Eurasia: The Return of the "Great Game"*. Palgrave Macmillan. 2010: 182.

<sup>145</sup> Garibov, Azad; Ibrahimov, Rovshan. "Geopolitical Competition in the Central Asia: The Dynamics of Relations with Azerbaijan". *Center for Strategic Studies*, IX, Baku, 2013: 43.

aforementioned Irano-Soviet agreement on linking Iran's rail network with Soviet Central Asia's and almost two decades after the latter's actual realization, December 2014 saw the opening of a second Iran–Central Asia rail link. The Etrek–Incheh Borun link is part of the Kazakhstan–Turkmenistan–Iran railway line, a project completed under the auspices of the Ashgabat Agreement and subsumed under the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC). The railway runs parallel to the Caspian coastline between Iran's Golestan province and Kazakhstan's Mangystau region, via western Turkmenistan. Aside from mitigating some of the effects of the Islamic Republic's international isolation, the resulting expansion of trade with Central Eurasia is seen as yet another way of diversifying Iran's own economy and reducing its dependency on oil exports.<sup>146</sup>

The visibility of infrastructure projects carried out in Central Eurasia with Iranian participation is arguably more important than their scope or the exact budget allocated to their construction. Neither the aforementioned gas pipelines, nor the railways and rolling stock—used overwhelmingly for freight—are necessarily on the conceptual radar of most citizens of the republics of the South Caucasus and Central Asia. By contrast, pretty much any citizen of Tajikistan who had travelled between the capital and the second largest city of Khujand has some awareness that the Anzob (a.k.a. Istiklol) tunnel, which now shortens the journey between the country's twin demographic cores, was built by an Iranian company. As the latter's preliminary

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"Iran Signs Tripartite Gas Swap Deal With Neighboring Azerbaijan And Turkmenistan". *Pipeline Technology Journal*, 2 December 2021. URL: [www.pipeline-journal.net/news/iran-signs-tripartite-gas-swap-deal-neighboring-azerbaijan-and-turkmenistan](http://www.pipeline-journal.net/news/iran-signs-tripartite-gas-swap-deal-neighboring-azerbaijan-and-turkmenistan)

<sup>146</sup> Azizi, Hamidreza. "Iran and the Eurasian Transport Initiatives: Short-term Challenges, Long-term Opportunities", *Caucasus International*, 8(2) 2018: 124-126.

Ibrahimov, Rafael. "Russia, Iran, and Turkey in Central Asia: A Nexus of Minor Tensions", Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 17th May 2017. URL: [www.institute.global/insights/geopolitics-and-security/russia-iran-and-turkey-central-asia-nexus-minor-tensions](http://www.institute.global/insights/geopolitics-and-security/russia-iran-and-turkey-central-asia-nexus-minor-tensions)

ceremonial opening in March 2006 was attended by both president Ahmadinejad and president Rahmon, physical connectivity has clearly also served Tehran as a diplomatic tool.<sup>147</sup>

An ingenious instrument of regional connectivity have been the already-alluded-to hydrocarbon swap deals—a *sui generis* barter system dating back to the mid-1990s. Iran uses oil or gas swaps as a way of overcoming the challenging topography of the Iranian plateau and the sheer distance between the core areas of hydrocarbon production in the southwest and Iran's demographic and industrial core in the northern half of the country.<sup>148</sup> It has mostly been Kazakhstan's and Turkmenistan's oil arriving on tankers to Iran's Caspian port of Neka, in exchange for which an equivalent volume of Iranian crude is to be exported from the Persian Gulf.<sup>149</sup> While the economic rationale behind these deals has been put in question, including by Iranian officials themselves,<sup>150</sup> the main benefit of swap deals should not be seen as economic. Aside from representing a curious case straddling material and immaterial connectivity—the exchange itself is, after all, largely virtual in nature<sup>151</sup>—swap deals have aided the creation of economic interdependence in the region. Similar transactions also highlight the fact that Iran is the

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<sup>147</sup> Garibov, Azad; Ibrahimov, Rovshan. "Geopolitical Competition in the Central Asia: The Dynamics of Relations with Azerbaijan". *Center for Strategic Studies*, IX, Baku, 2013: 42.

It needs to be said that the reputation of the *de-facto*-unfinished tunnel was extremely poor until very recently, due to the non-existent drainage, lighting and ventilation. Iran's local image may have therefore actually suffered as a result, at least until the necessary refurbishment was carried out.

Dilip, Hiro. *Inside Central Asia: A Political and Cultural History of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkey, and Iran*. Overlook Duckworth, Peter Mayer Publishers, Inc. New York & London. 2009: 387.

<sup>148</sup> Herzig, Edmund. *Iran and the Former Soviet South*. London: Chatham House, 1995. 23.

Garibov, Azad; Ibrahimov, Rovshan. "Geopolitical Competition in the Central Asia: The Dynamics of Relations with Azerbaijan". *Center for Strategic Studies*, IX, Baku, 2013: 44.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>150</sup> Dorraj, Manochehr; Entessar, Nader. "Iran's Northern Exposure: Foreign Policy Challenges in Eurasia". Occasional Paper No. 13 for *Center for International and Regional Studies* Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar. 2013: 14.

<sup>151</sup> With a stroke of the pen, Central Asian oil shipped across the Caspian for an equivalent amount of oil exported by Iran from the Persian Gulf now becomes—for all intents and purposes—'Kazakhstan's or Turkmenistan's oil exported overseas', without the former having ever left the inner confines of the Eurasian continent.

only state that physically bridges two of most energy-rich sub-regions of the planet: the Caspian basin and the Persian Gulf.<sup>152</sup>

*B) Major Eurasia-spanning rising-power-funded 'game-changer' projects*

Two large-scale transcontinental infrastructure projects are effectively 'game-changers' for Iran's engagement with its northern post-Soviet neighbourhood, since the financing capacities of key Eurasian players vastly outstrip that of Iran, or that of any Central Eurasian republic. The first framework is the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC) which aims to link up India and with Russia's market (as well as that of Europe further afield), via Iran and Azerbaijan. The genesis of the project dates back to the 1990s, with the INSTC agreement proper signed by India, Russia and Iran in the early 2000s. Iran's Chabahar deep water port—the expansion and modernization of which is being financed by India and which currently benefits from a US-sanctions waiver due to Washington's apprehension about China, India's geopolitical rival—is the cornerstone of the INSTC. Aside from Chabahar proper and the railway link integrating the port with Iran's railway network, the only other major unfinished section of the Corridor is Rasht–Astara leg of the Astara–Rasht–Qazvin railway. Located entirely inside Iran, the completion of the link has suffered multiple delays, prompting Russian commitment to allocate the necessary funds.<sup>153</sup> Despite the broader project being conceived in New Delhi as a way to access Eurasia, all while circumventing Pakistan—India's traditional rival—additional initiatives conceived in Tehran as a *de facto* extension of the INSTC had been agreed on since. This includes the Central Asia–

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<sup>152</sup> Kazemzadeh, Hamed. "Iranian Influences in the Caucasus". *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, 92(25) 2017: 3.

<sup>153</sup> "Iran, Russia sign \$1.6bn contract to build Rasht-Astara railway". *IRNA*, May 17, 2023. URL: [en.irna.ir/news/85113739/Iran-Russia-sign-1-6bn-contract-to-build-Rasht-Astara-railway](https://en.irna.ir/news/85113739/Iran-Russia-sign-1-6bn-contract-to-build-Rasht-Astara-railway)

Persian Gulf transport corridor envisioned by the aforementioned 2011 Ashgabat Agreement, joined by Pakistan in 2016 and by India some two years later.<sup>154</sup>

In addition to a north–south transport vector, a second large-scale infrastructure initiative, this time an east–west one, promises to span the entire Eurasian landmass and beyond—China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). One of the main branches is supposed to traverse the bulk of Central Asian republics and Iran, greatly deepening connectivity between the latter countries as a result. Any initiative of this nature is going to further reduce Iran’s international isolation, as the funding of all of these projects is independent of essentially Western-dominated lending institutions, such as the World Bank. Iran would nevertheless stand to lose much income, prestige and regional influence, should the BRI’s Iran-traversing China–Central Asia–West Asia corridor find itself ‘course-corrected’ entirely in favour of the multimodal ‘Middle Corridor’. The latter Russia- and Iran-circumventing artery links Azerbaijan to Kazakhstan via Caspian Sea shipping routes. A more recent addition conceptualized as part of the east–west BRI connectivity is the currently-in-development China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway,<sup>155</sup> which should be more conducive to the more southern Iran-centred onward route. This is because it would be in a position to circumvent Kazakhstan, the only Central Asian republic currently with any rail link (two, in fact) with China at its disposal. Even if

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<sup>154</sup> Azizi, Hamidreza. “Iran and the Eurasian Transport Initiatives: Short-term Challenges, Long-term Opportunities”. *Caucasus International*, 8(2) 2018: 125-127, 134.

<sup>155</sup> Mammadov, Mahammad. “With Russia and Iran sanctioned, Middle Corridor has a chance to establish itself as a viable route in the East-West trade”. *Topchubashov Center*, 15 March 2022. URL: [top-center.org/en/analytics/3348/with-russia-and-iran-sanctioned-middle-corridor-has-a-chance-to-establish-itself-as-a-viable-route-in-the-east-west-trade](https://top-center.org/en/analytics/3348/with-russia-and-iran-sanctioned-middle-corridor-has-a-chance-to-establish-itself-as-a-viable-route-in-the-east-west-trade)

Devonshire-Ellis, Chris. “Kyrgyzstan And The Belt & Road Initiative: Trans Central Asian Road & Rail Connectivity & Added Value Manufacturing Services”. *Silk Road Briefing*, June 30, 2021. URL: [www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2021/06/29/kyrgyzstan-and-the-belt-road-initiative-trans-central-asian-road-rail-connectivity-added-value-manufacturing-services/](https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2021/06/29/kyrgyzstan-and-the-belt-road-initiative-trans-central-asian-road-rail-connectivity-added-value-manufacturing-services/)



tangible economic benefits of north–south or east–west connectivity megaprojects take longer to manifest, it is not unwise to anticipate early political and diplomatic windfall.

*C) Closed or fundamentally-altered agenda points*

Aside from tangible progress on the ground in terms of material connectivity, the other tangible takeaway from more than three decades of Iran cultivating ties with Central Eurasia has been the latter offering an escape from international isolation. By becoming a trade partner of all South Caucasian and Central Asian republics, by reassuring the latter states of the benign nature of its regional engagement, and by respecting the intersubjective, regionally-upheld principle of non-interference, Tehran managed to offset Washington’s attempts to get the Central Eurasian republics to downgrade their bilateral relations with Iran.<sup>156</sup> For instance, the latter’s right to pursue civilian nuclear technology is regionally upheld and not generally seen as a mere cover for a WMD programme.<sup>157</sup> On the whole, Iran can credibly present itself as a *status quo*-upholding power in the post-Soviet space. For instance Tehran’s mediation efforts, both in case of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and in case of the civil war in Tajikistan, were marked

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<sup>156</sup>See for examples: under George H. W. Bush.: Herzig, Edmund. “Iran in the Caucasus, Caspian and Central Asia: Lessons for Western Strategy” in Whitlock, Eugene (Ed.) *Iran and its Neighbors: Diverging Views on a Strategic Region*. Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik/German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin. July 2003. 23; under Obama: Therme, Clément. “Iranian Foreign Policy towards the South Caucasus: Between Revolutionary Ideals and Realpolitik”. Conference paper 2011, 10; under Trump: Azizi, Hamidreza. “Iran and the Eurasian Transport Initiatives: Short-term Challenges, Long-term Opportunities”. *Caucasus International*, 8(2) 2018: 132-133.

<sup>157</sup> Koolae, Elaheh and Mohammad Hossein Hafezian. “The Islamic Republic of Iran and the South Caucasus Republics”. *Iranian Studies*, 43(3) 2010: 400.

Dilip, Hiro. *Inside Central Asia: A Political and Cultural History of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkey, and Iran*. Overlook Duckworth, Peter Mayer Publishers, Inc. New York & London. 2009: 388.

by high degrees of pragmatism that defied expectations of how an ostensibly ‘revolutionary Shia Muslim regime’ would conduct itself.<sup>158</sup>

#### i) Caspian Sea delineation

One of the agenda-points in the framework of Iran–Central Eurasia relations—which would get correspondingly glossed over by my interviewees in Baku and Tashkent on grounds of being a *fait accompli*—has been the now-largely-resolved issue of Caspian Sea delimitation. As a large enclosed body of water with no natural links to the world’s oceans, it fails to fit the conventional criteria to be legally considered a sea and is therefore not an obvious subject to international law principles of a twelve-nautical-mile exclusive economic zone. The Soviet-era regime had been relatively straightforward by virtue of involving only two interlocutors. Due to disagreements between the five new riparian states, it was clear from the start that any multilateral agreement would require a *sui generis* legal framework, one more akin to those regulating border lakes. Furthermore, use of waterways and fishing would not be nearly as contentious as use of subsoil resources. Due to the considerable hydrocarbon deposits under the Caspian—albeit admittedly largely absent from the section adjacent to northern Iran—disagreements over the allocation of a ‘fair share’ of the latter and over the choice of the specific delineating principle had been one of the major outlying territorial disputes in the region. These mutually incompatible stances came to a head during the aforementioned 2001 military escalation over a Baku-Azerbaijani exploration vessel allegedly ‘trespassing’ into Iran’s purported section of the Caspian and being expelled

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<sup>158</sup> Shaffer, Brenda. “The Geopolitics of the Caucasus”. *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, 15(2) 2009: 131-142.

This did not prevent Tehran’s foreign policy decisionmakers from being subjected to criticism; both domestically from ideological hardliners, as well as in Baku, the latter citing alleged pro-Armenian bias in Tehran.

by an Iranian military vessel and aircraft.<sup>159</sup> To further compound matters, the vessel was operated by British Petroleum, thus increasing Iranian paranoia about Anglo-American encroachment. An additional development marking the unsustainability of Iran's intransigent position of either jointly exploiting the Caspian as a condominium, or at least dividing the seabed into equal 1/5 sections<sup>160</sup> among the five riparian states, was Russia's defection in 2002 from the latter position in favour of the mainstream 'modified median line' principle, leaving Iran isolated on the matter.<sup>161</sup>

A key breakthrough in the regional equation has been the 2018 Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea. The latter agreement sets up a roadmap for an eventual delineation of the Caspian, allowing for concrete adjustments realized on a bilateral basis between a specific neighbour dyad or triad. The legal regime regulating the exploitation of the non-subsoil resources of the Caspian is that of maritime law, generally allowing for joint exploitation beyond the 15 nautical miles coastal strip (going up to 25 miles in case of fishing rights).<sup>162</sup> Admittedly Iran is the littoral state that benefitted the least from the agreement's provisions, given that a condominium settlement, or an 'equal share' partition of the Caspian subsoil, is now formally out of the question.<sup>163</sup> On the other hand, both Tehran and Moscow have shown no compunction to oppose trans-Caspian gas pipeline construction on ostensibly-

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<sup>159</sup> Ismailzade, Fariz. "A breakthrough in Iran-Azerbaijan relations?" *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*. February 19th, 2016. URL: [www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13330-a-breakthrough-in-iran-azerbaijan-relations?.html](http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13330-a-breakthrough-in-iran-azerbaijan-relations?.html)

<sup>160</sup> Iran has the most to lose, as virtually any other delineating principle affects Iran in a disproportionately negative way.

<sup>161</sup> Kozhanov, Nikolay. *Iran's Strategic Thinking: The Evolution of Iran's Foreign Policy, 1979-2018*. Gerlach Press. Berlin, Germany. 2018: 81.

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<sup>163</sup> Issaev, Leonid; Kozhanov, Nikolay. "Will Russia back US' maximum pressure on Iran?" *AlJazeera*. 13 June 2019. URL: [www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2019/6/13/will-russia-back-us-maximum-pressure-on-iran/](http://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2019/6/13/will-russia-back-us-maximum-pressure-on-iran/)

Kouhi-Esfahani, Marzieh. *Iran's Foreign Policy in the South Caucasus*. Routledge. 2019: 102.

environmental grounds. The Convention's environmental provisions now provide a more solid legal basis for the latter. Bad-faith instrumentalization of the latter by Moscow or Tehran as a way to secure *de facto* veto power over any such project in the future can be expected. By circumventing both Iran and Russia, the latter structure would necessarily run counter their own strategic interests. The contentious scenario of the Caspian Sea ever being used by third parties for military purposes had been repeatedly addressed by reassurances by riparian states, mostly *vis-à-vis* Tehran, to refrain from allowing the latter a formal provision of the treaty.<sup>164</sup> An additional qualifier for a sustainable *modus vivendi* around the Caspian is nevertheless the fact that the Islamic Republic's government has not yet sent the draft Convention to parliament for final ratification.<sup>165</sup>

## ii) Regional armed conflicts

Another area of Iran–Central Eurasia relations that has undergone fundamental changes had been the bulk of protracted regional crises and armed conflicts largely coming to an end. The peace agreement putting an end to the civil war in Tajikistan was signed in 1997, following much joint proactive mediation by Tehran and Moscow.<sup>166</sup> Much more recently, more than two decades later, the 'frozen conflict' over Nagorno-Karabakh becomes 'hotter than ever', culminating in a unilateral Baku-Azerbaijani military victory in November 2020. Less than three years later, a mass exodus of Karabakh Armenian civilians takes place following a pull-out of Russian peacekeepers from the

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<sup>164</sup> "The Caspian Sea Treaty". *Strategic Comments*, 24(9) 2018: i-ii.

<sup>165</sup> Kaleji, Vali. "Iran Balks at Definition of Offshore Territorial Baselines in Caspian Sea". *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 18(88) June 3, 2021. URL: [jamestown.org/program/iran-balks-at-definition-of-offshore-territorial-baselines-in-caspian-sea/](http://jamestown.org/program/iran-balks-at-definition-of-offshore-territorial-baselines-in-caspian-sea/)

<sup>166</sup> See Smith, Grant R. "Tajikistan: The rocky road to peace". *Central Asian Survey*, 18(2) 1999: 243-251.

Armenian enclave.<sup>167</sup> Lastly, the situation in Afghanistan has been profoundly marked by the Taliban's takeover of Kabul in mid-2021—admittedly followed by a few months of residual fighting in the Panjshir holdouts of forces loyal to the internationally-recognized government—which effectively put an end to some four-and-a-half decades of near-continuous armed conflict in the country, at least as far as the numbers of yearly fatalities are concerned.<sup>168</sup> The impact of the above conflicts on Tehran's relations with its northern post-Soviet neighbourhood has been profound. The aforementioned threat of conflict spillover—once Tehran's overarching 'northern policy' preoccupation following the Soviet collapse—has never been lower, despite periodically escalating rhetoric and sabre-rattling exchanged with the Republic of Azerbaijan. The latter has stemmed from a confluence of Iranian fears of Azerbaijan seizing the long-coveted Zangezur corridor from Armenia by force, as well as that of Israel gaining a foothold in the Republic of Azerbaijan.<sup>169</sup> Iran admittedly failed at preventing the opening of the aforementioned multimodal Caspian-straddling 'Middle Corridor', which now links the aforementioned South Caucasian neighbour with Kazakhstan, and major markets further afield. By contrast, the withdrawal of the West's military forces from Afghanistan marked the 'freeing up' of the Islamic Republic's eastern and northeastern flank and a reduction of Washington's overall geopolitical attention paid to Central Eurasia, to Tehran's obvious benefit.

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<sup>167</sup> "The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: A Visual Explainer". *International Crisis Group*. 28 June 2023. URL: [www.crisisgroup.org/content/nagorno-karabakh-conflict-visual-explainer](http://www.crisisgroup.org/content/nagorno-karabakh-conflict-visual-explainer)

DePencier, Fin; Galati, Katia. "Armenia scrambles to accommodate uprooted Karabakhis". *EurasiaNet*, Sep 29, 2023. URL: [eurasianet.org/armenia-scrambles-to-accommodate-uprooted-karabakhis](http://eurasianet.org/armenia-scrambles-to-accommodate-uprooted-karabakhis)

<sup>168</sup> Menon, Shruti. "Afghanistan: What's changed a year after Taliban return". *BBC*, 16 August 2022. URL: [www.bbc.co.uk/news/62469204](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/62469204)

<sup>169</sup> Iddon, Paul. "Iran, Azerbaijan tensions heighten risks of military conflict". *Middle East Eye*. 22 April 2023. URL: [www.middleeasteye.net/news/prospect-military-conflict-between-iran-and-azerbaijan](http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/prospect-military-conflict-between-iran-and-azerbaijan)  
"Why Iranians are calling for war with Azerbaijan?" *Middle East Eye*. 11 April 2023. URL: [www.middleeasteye.net/news/iran-azerbaijan-war-are-calling-why](http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iran-azerbaijan-war-are-calling-why)

Aside from overcoming a ‘trifecta’ of territorial disputes, regional stability, and foreign penetration, an additional fundamental development has been a range of dividends from Tehran’s credible reassurances of pragmatic, de-ideologized conduct in Central Eurasia. Despite a jealous ostensible protection of national sovereignty having been the overriding principle of Islam Karimov’s presidency in Uzbekistan, Tashkent joined the US-led bandwagon of anti-Iran sanctions in the mid-1990s.<sup>170</sup> This would never happen again in a Central Eurasian capital—outside the specific context of the unprecedented 2006 UN sanctions—as demonstrated by the most recent firm rebuff of Washington’s appeals to Central Eurasian capitals to join the Iran-targeting-sanctions bandwagon.<sup>171</sup> The death of Karimov also marked arguably the strongest Iran-affecting regional-policy shift. To all appearances, it put an end to the volatile Tehran–Tashkent–Dushanbe ‘zero-sum triad’. Following a historical low of Tehran–Dushanbe relations in the second half of the 2010s, which allegedly included the use of Tajikistan’s veto power *vis-à-vis* the prospect of Iran’s full SCO accession,<sup>172</sup> Iran finally passed the latter milestone in the summer of 2023.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> Mesbahi, Mohiaddin. “Iran and Central Asia: Paradigm and Policy”. *Central Asian Survey*. 23(2) 2004: 119.

Uzbekistan was the only Central Eurasian republic to do so.

<sup>171</sup> For an evolution of these diplomatic overtures holding decreasing sway, see examples under George H. W. Bush: Herzig, Edmund. “Iran in the Caucasus, Caspian and Central Asia: Lessons for Western Strategy”. in Whitlock, Eugene (Ed.) *Iran and its Neighbors: Diverging Views on a Strategic Region*. Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik/German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin. July 2003: 23.

under Obama: Therme, Clément. “Iranian Foreign Policy towards the South Caucasus: Between Revolutionary Ideals and Realpolitik”. Conference paper 2011: 10.

under Trump: Azizi, Hamidreza. “Iran and the Eurasian Transport Initiatives: Short-term Challenges, Long-term Opportunities”. *Caucasus International*, 8(2) 2018: 132-133.

<sup>172</sup> Grajewski, Nicole. “An Illusory Entente: The Myth of a Russia-China-Iran ‘Axis’”. *Asian Affairs*, 53(1) 2022: 174

It would be naïve to think that a veto by such a ‘inconsequential member state’ would not have been informally overridden, had Moscow and Beijing been aligned at that specific juncture *vis-à-vis* the prospect of Iran’s accession.

<sup>173</sup> “Iran introduces national coordinator to SCO’s secretariat”. *Asia-Plus*, July 20, 2023. URL: [old.asiaplustj.info/en/news/world/20230720/iran-introduces-national-coordinator-to-scos-secretariat](https://old.asiaplustj.info/en/news/world/20230720/iran-introduces-national-coordinator-to-scos-secretariat)

Some fundamental obstacles to the Iran–Central Eurasia relationship continue unabated. The individual economies of the region are nearly all oriented towards the exports of commodities, thus disallowing greater engagement in trading more complex, value-added goods of a complementary nature. The Iran–Azerbaijan trade relationship, where the respective economies are the least complementary of them all, paradoxically benefits from the latter country’s own internal logistical inability to ensure the supply of its own territorial exclave.<sup>174</sup> Turkey has nevertheless carried out shrewd business undertakings in Central Eurasia that puts Iran to shame on the whole. For instance, Tehran’s inability to rein in unscrupulous Iranian businessmen in places such as Uzbekistan had ruined the local reputation of Iranian products in a lasting manner and ensured their replacement with Turkish ones in the second half of the 1990s.<sup>175</sup> One understudied asset that Iran’s soft power is nonetheless only rarely given credit for in Central Eurasia is linguistic proximity on the side of select members of the state apparatus and the business community. One can intuitively grasp the fact that Turkish citizens are well positioned to make the most of the linguistic proximity *vis-à-vis* five out of the eight aforementioned republics. It is nonetheless less common knowledge that a disproportionate amount of Iranian citizens active in Central Asia are Khorasani-Turkish or Azerbaijani Shias, and therefore just as capable of leveraging the Turkic linguistic connection on a practical day-to-day level.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Shanahan, Robert. “Religion or Realpolitik: A Comparative Study of Iranian Foreign Policy towards Azerbaijan and Pakistan”. Conference Paper - 4th Int. Virtual Conference on Iran and the World, April 2013.

<sup>175</sup> Pakaein, Mohsen. *Čahār sāl dar Sarzamīn-e Teymūr: Hāṭerāt-e saḡīr-e sābeq-e Īrān dar Ozbakestān* (1374-1378) [Four Years in the Land of Tamerlane: Recollections of Iran’s Former Ambassador to Uzbekistan (~1995-1999)] Oral History Unit, Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS) Tehran, 2010: 80-81.

<sup>176</sup> Ibrahimov, Rafael. “Russia, Iran, and Turkey in Central Asia: A Nexus of Minor Tensions”, *Tony Blair Institute for Global Change*, 17th May 2017. URL: [www.institute.global/insights/geopolitics-and-security/russia-iran-and-turkey-central-asia-nexus-minor-tensions](http://www.institute.global/insights/geopolitics-and-security/russia-iran-and-turkey-central-asia-nexus-minor-tensions)

Despite the continuation of the extraterritorial effect of unilaterally-reimposed US sanctions, the Iran–India relationship continues to benefit from the aforementioned sanctions waiver *vis-à-vis* the Chabahar project and surrounding infrastructure, with direct implications this has on material connectivity between Iran and Central Eurasia.<sup>177</sup> Conversely Russia’s February 2022 invasion of Ukraine and the resulting Western economic sanctions targeting the former—which now vastly surpasses the sheer volume and intensity of those targeting Iran (with the important caveat of largely sparing Russia’s oil and gas sector)—have brought Moscow and Tehran closer together. The effect of this is a ‘mixed bag’, as it renders Russia and Iran strategic partners, but does not necessarily improve Tehran’s negotiating position *vis-à-vis* Moscow. The issue of near-pathological deference has been already discussed earlier. The overall track record of Iran–Russia relations shows that the latter maintains a categorically zero-sum approach to energy supply and distribution in the wider region.<sup>178</sup>

### III) Iran’s elite discursive framing of Iran–Central Eurasia relations

As has been indicated, both the South Caucasus and Central Asia resonate strongly with the geopolitical imagination of Iran’s foreign policymakers, as well as among educated Iranians more broadly. With the collapse of the USSR, Iran found itself, virtually overnight, with 3 land-border and 2 additional maritime-border interlocutors, instead of

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<sup>177</sup> Azizi, Hamidreza. “Iran and the Eurasian Transport Initiatives: Short-term Challenges, Long-term Opportunities”. *Caucasus International*, 8(2) 2018: 134.

<sup>178</sup> Yuldasheva, Guli. *Geopolitičeskie protsessy v sovremennoĭ tsentral’noĭ Azii: Iran i SŠA* [Geopolitical Processes in Contemporary Central Asia: Iran and the US]. Latvian Institute of International Affairs, Riga. 2017: 118, 189.

“Russian-Iranian strategic partnership treaty still in the works — diplomat”. *TASS*, 20 July 2023. URL: [tass.com/politics/1649645](https://tass.com/politics/1649645)

Wadhams, Nick. “Russia Is Now the World’s Most-Sanctioned Nation” *Bloomberg*, March 7, 2022. URL: [www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-03-07/russia-surges-past-iran-to-become-world-s-most-sanctioned-nation](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-03-07/russia-surges-past-iran-to-become-world-s-most-sanctioned-nation)



the single one up to 1991, at its northern boundary.<sup>179</sup> In this constituent chapter-section, I postulate that the identity of the Iranian nation-state is fundamentally informed by its elites' understanding of their national past (real or imagined) and of their country's role in the wider region. This understanding, in turn, informs Iran's foreign-policy decisionmakers' approaches to said region and its specific constituent sub-regions. Such a strong intersubjective component understandably warrants the constructivist theoretical framework chosen at the onset.

Iran's remarkably-pragmatic and arguably-constructive foreign-policy approach towards post-Soviet Central Eurasia ever since the latter republics' independence contrast starkly with Tehran's much more assertive and forceful policy towards much of the Persian Gulf and the Levant (see pages 61-62). Three types of factors seem to have been at play concurrently: personal factors, temporal factors and institutional factors. Tehran's policy—however *ad hoc* and lacking of a coherent vision—towards the freshly-Balkanized formerly-Soviet space had to be devised at a specific historical juncture. The Islamic Republic had just exited a bloody protracted interstate conflict with its Baathist-ruled western neighbour some three years prior. It was impacted by the death of the revolutionary state's founder, Ruhollah Khomeini, some two years prior, which itself coincided with the approval of a major constitutional amendment. A case can be made that Iran, internationally isolated as a sovereign nation, could scarcely afford to antagonize an entire 'batch of newly minted northern neighbours' by degrees of revolutionary posturing typical of the early 1980s. As Iran's foreign policy is fought over—rather than devised by a single power-centre, between various wings of the state, not the least of which has been the Iranian Revolutionary Guardian Corps (IRGC)—

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<sup>179</sup> Sajjadpour, Seyed Kazem. "Iran, the Caucasus and Central Asia" in Banuazizi, Ali; Meiner, Myron (Eds.) *The New Geopolitics of Central Asia and Its Borderlands*. I.B. Tauris, London. 1994: 198.

most notably its Quds Force extraterritorial branch—the Supreme Leader, the Presidency, the Foreign Policy Committee within the *Majles*, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, in addition to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs proper—some order was introduced and a formalized space created for seeking compromise by the establishment of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC). The latter body, set up as a result of the aforementioned 1989 constitutional amendments, brings together representatives of much of the aforementioned centres of power. Edward Wastnidge makes a convincing claim that the freshly-founded body's inception having had only shortly predated the collapse of the Soviet Union ensured that Iran's policy towards the 'former Soviet South' will not be an adventurist one monopolized by a single power-centre and will thus benefit from the moderating influence of multiple institutional factions being brought to the table in search of a workable compromise.<sup>180</sup>

As has been alluded to, Iran's Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance has an outsized influence on Tehran's foreign policy in select areas, anecdotally said to be at times 'more substantial than that of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs'. Even accounting for the clear hyperbole in the latter claim made by then-culture-minister Ata'ollah Mohajerani,<sup>181</sup> it is clear that the very fact that a country's culture ministry has any meaningful influence on foreign policy makes Iran stand out from the bulk of the world's sovereign nations. Another ostensibly-cultural actor that serves as a tool of Tehran's foreign policy is the Islamic Culture and Communications Organization (*Sāzmān-e Farhang va Ertebāṭāt-e Eslāmī*, alternatively translated as the 'Islamic Culture and Relations Organization') the Iranian counterpart to China's Confucius

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<sup>180</sup> Wastnidge, Edward. *Diplomacy and Reform in Iran: Foreign Policy under Khatami*. I.B.Tauris. 2016: 20.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

Institute or to the British Council, which, while nominally under the auspices of the aforementioned culture ministry, responds directly to the Office of the Supreme Leader.<sup>182</sup> It is therefore not imprudent to attribute some portion of Iran's foreign policy towards Central Eurasia to considerations of Iran's own national culture and national elites' self-perception. Other Western scholars of Iran such as Ali Ansari would go even further, insofar as he asserts, in Iran's case, "the centrality of culture and civilizational identity to the formation of foreign policy".<sup>183</sup> This fact further renders the use of a constructivist lens preferable over other mainstream IR frameworks.

*A) Iran's national myths and their relevance to the South Caucasus and Central Asia*

A merely ethnonationalist 'Persian chauvinist' or a one-sidedly 'Muslim universalist' vision—or even the latter's 'particularist' transnational-Shia-Muslim ideological offshoot—of the Iranian nation-state's identity would be inherently reductive, in spite of brief periods of such a desired outcome being unsuccessfully engineered over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Soviet collapse—specifically the emergence of an independent Tajikistan and a Republic of Azerbaijan—further solidified the notion that the mere fact of being a Persian speaker or the mere fact of being (at least a nominal) Shia Muslim 'does not an Iranian identity make'. Both components in concert nonetheless remain key constituents of said national identity in the modern day.

A case can be made that the inherited pre-modern cultural capital needed for the subsequent creation of a civic, state-centred Iranian identity in the modern era had been

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<sup>182</sup> Wastnidge, Edward. "The Modalities of Iranian Soft Power: From Cultural Diplomacy to Soft War". *Politics*. 2014: 7.

<sup>183</sup> Ansari, Ali M. "Civilizational Identity and Foreign Policy: The Case of Iran". in Shaffer, Brenda (Ed.) *The Limits of Culture: Islam and Foreign Policy*. MIT Press, 2006: 259.

accrued during the first decades of Safavid rule. The conversion of much of the population of the Iranian plateau from Sunni to Shia Islam made the polity become seen, both internally and externally, as fundamentally ‘different from its Sunni neighbours’. In a tongue-in-cheek manner, Rudi Matthee paraphrases an early-20<sup>th</sup> century political motto to approximate Shah Ismail I’s shelving of the idea of exporting his religious project beyond the boundaries of his dynastic realm, as resigning to the idea of ‘Shiism in One County’. The author deems the state-sponsored promulgation of millenarian Shiism a proto-national “boundary-setting ideology directed against its neighbours”, as the inability to convert tribal groups at the Iranian plateau’s boundaries—be it Afghans and Baluchis in the east, Lezgin Dagestanis in the northwest or the Uzbeks of the northeast—rendered Iran a more compact and ideologically and demographically coherent polity in the long-run.<sup>184</sup> While modern-day Iran also has tribally-organized Sunni Muslim ethnic minority populations—scattered along its borders in often-economically-deprived provinces, such as most of Iran’s Kurds, Turkmen and the Baluch (smaller Iranian subsets compared to main demographic cores in Turkey, Turkmenistan and Pakistan respectively)—their overall demographic weight *vis-à-vis* the Shia Muslim majority is much weaker.<sup>185</sup> Iran’s minorities, be they Sunni or Shia, have been, on the whole, remarkably inoculated against ethnolinguistic appeals. Minority identities have tended to coexist with a core civic or state-centred national identity.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Matthee, Rudi. “Was Safavid Iran an Empire?” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 53(1/2) *Empires and Emporia: The Orient in World Historical Space and Time*. 2010: 256.

<sup>185</sup> That is compared to a 16<sup>th</sup> century Safavid Iran that includes larger peripheral Sunni-Muslim-inhabited territories such as Dagestan or the Hindu Kush.

<sup>186</sup> See Ahmadi, Hamid. “Unity within Diversity: Foundations and Dynamics of National Identity in Iran”. *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, 14(1) 2005: 127-147.

The trauma of military defeats inflicted by Tsarist Russia and the British Empire—namely the aforementioned loss of Caucasian territories under the provisions of the Gulistan and Turkmenchay Treaties to the former and the re-confirmation of the loss of Herat in 1838 and then again in 1857 due to the machinations of the latter—accelerated the members of the Iranian political and intellectual elite’s drive to pursue a modernization of their country. One of the byproducts of this modernization had been the consolidation of the idea of such a thing as an ‘Iranian nation’, national identity itself being a relatively recent phenomenon one can trace back to 18<sup>th</sup> century Western Europe.<sup>187</sup>

In the aptly-named chapter ‘The Paleontology of Iranian Nationalism’ of his book, Zia-Ebrahimi convincingly describes the genealogy of Western-inspired 19<sup>th</sup> century proto-nationalism as early material for subsequent 20<sup>th</sup> century nationbuilding. In addition to the aforementioned traumatic 19<sup>th</sup> century encounter with European technological superiority—very much unlike Iran’s earlier encounters in the centuries prior—which served as a catalyst for conceptual shifts, the freshly-annexed territories of the South Caucasus served almost as a laboratory for more ‘controlled’ encounters with ideas of Western modernity. The relatively porous Russo-Persian border, stabilized on the Aras River, allowed for the largely-unfettered flow of new thought. Mirza Fatali Akhundov (known in Iran as Āḥundzāde), who spent most of his life in Tiflis, was the main architect of a worldview described by Zia-Ebrahimi as ‘dislocative nationalism’. While neither he nor his acolyte-via-correspondence Mirza Agha Khan Kermani were met with much understanding from their contemporaries, the ‘rediscovery’ of their writings by 20<sup>th</sup> century Iranian scholar Fereyduṇ Adamiyat helped systematize many of

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<sup>187</sup> See Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso Books, 1983.

their ideas under Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and integrate them into the nationalist worldview at the time.<sup>188</sup> This has been the case in ways that persist in Iran's secular intellectual circles—admittedly kept away from any meaningful institutional influence or levers of power by the current regime—to this very day.

The period immediately preceding the Iranian Revolution was marked by nationbuilding efforts centred on the institutionalized commemoration the Achaemenid period. As a wholesale reaction to the late-Pahlavi period, elements of nationbuilding that would include narratives of pre-Islamic Iran had been excised from state-sanctioned Iranian nationalism in the early decades of the Islamic Republic. This reflected the Quranic worldview of the much-maligned *Jāhiliyyah*, the so-called 'age of ignorance', and also was a manifestation of early earnest efforts to not have the Iranian nation as the chief constituency to the Islamic Republic, but rather the global *Umma*. The Iran–Iraq war nevertheless reinforced more Iran-centred and more specifically Shia-oriented notions of martyrdom. Only in the 1990s would references to Cyrus the Great seep into state narratives and Iran's cultural diplomacy. Khatami's 'dialogue of civilizations' foreign-policy agenda first brought this to an external interlocutor, mostly as a matter of political expediency.<sup>189</sup> It was however Ahmadinejad's populism-tinged presidency that would break a domestic taboo and bring forward a newfound appreciation for the Achaemenids to a domestic audience at the official level. It thus appears that officially-sanctioned Iranian nationalism now integrates both (strongly Shia-coloured) Islamic

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<sup>188</sup> See Zia-Ebrahimi, Reza. *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism: Race and the Politics of Dislocation*. New York, 2016.

<sup>189</sup> See Wastnidge, Edward. *Diplomacy and Reform in Iran: Foreign Policy under Khatami*. I.B.Tauris. 2016: 20.

elements and ‘civilizationally-grounded’ state nationalist narratives inclusive of pre-Islamic dynasties.<sup>190</sup>

A key feature of Iranian national myths is the ostensibly-perennial nature of the toponym ‘Iran’, despite the term not originally designating a fixed territory and in spite of it having fallen out of use following the Arab invasion of the Iranian plateau in the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century in most contexts outside of mythical and semi-mythical historical accounts. The popularity of the Shahnameh epic arguably kept the idea of Iran on the conceptual radar of Persian speakers, however uses of the term (or lack thereof) by dynastic polities when referring to themselves invariably coincided with a specific temporary geopolitical configuration. It is an underappreciated observation that the first wider use of Iran as a toponym and name of a dynastic polity roughly corresponding to the Iranian plateau occurred under Ilkhanid<sup>191</sup> rule and was then again resuscitated under the Safavids. In both instances, an adversary consolidated power of the ‘other’ side of the *Jayhūn* (Amu Darya) river—associated with the polity ruled by legendary king Afrāsīyāb—be it the Chagatai Khanate in the former instance, or the realms of the Abu’l-Khayrid Shaybanid Uzbeks in the latter instance.<sup>192</sup> In the pre-modern period, ‘Iran’ is therefore inseparable from an awareness of an ontological ‘other’.<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> See Fozi, Navid. “Neo-Iranian Nationalism: Pre-Islamic Grandeur and Shi’i Eschatology in President Mahmud Ahmadinejad’s Rhetoric”. *Middle East Journal*, 70(2) 2016: 227-248.

<sup>191</sup> The term refers to the dynastic polity founded by Hulegu Khan, one of Genghis Khan’s grandsons.

<sup>192</sup> De Blois, François. “The Concept of Iran in Zoroastrian and Other Traditions”. The 19th Kutar Memorial Lecture, SOAS, London 21 April 2016. URL: [www.academia.edu/28561291/The\\_concept\\_of\\_Iran\\_in\\_Zoroastrian\\_and\\_other\\_traditions](http://www.academia.edu/28561291/The_concept_of_Iran_in_Zoroastrian_and_other_traditions)

<sup>193</sup> This does not preclude the common use of broader terms such as *Īrān-zamīn* (Greater Iran), or *Ĥorāsān-e bozorg* (Greater Khorasan), which are also inclusive of parts of Central Asia.

Another national myth, a specific foreign-policy *topos* is Iran being the natural leader of a unique Iranian-Islamic civilization (*tamaddon-e Eslāmī-o-Īrānī*).<sup>194</sup> Such an endogenous understanding of an Iranian-Islamic civilization exhibits some overlap with the ‘Persianate’ cultural realm coined in Western scholarship.<sup>195</sup> The disintegration of the USSR thus promised, in the eyes of Iran’s foreign-policy decisionmakers, to enfranchise whole territorial swathes belonging to said civilization and shift Iran’s position from being at the periphery of an Arab-dominated regional complex to being at the very core of a West-and-Central Asia one.<sup>196</sup>

Juxtaposed against such unbridled optimism is the actual practical policy preoccupation prioritized immediately after the Soviet collapse in 1991, as armed conflicts in and around Nagorno-Karabakh and Tajikistan would quickly follow suit. Associated with the latter is the *topos* of contagion and containment. A component of the latter is the idea that regional crises—unless speedily deescalated as a concerted effort by the main regional players—could be exploited by ‘malicious extra-regional actors’, turning a localized conflict into a protracted ‘internationally-penetrated’ one.<sup>197</sup>

<sup>194</sup> The latter is distinct from both the Arab-dominated ‘Western Islamic world’ and from remnants of non-Muslim Iranian cultural presence—such as the now-majority-Christian ‘steppe Iranian refuge’ of Ossetia straddling the Greater Caucasus, or in the Parthian-informed cultural and linguistic legacies of Armenia

<sup>195</sup> See the term ‘Iranian-Islamic civilization’ used in Kiani, Davood. “Iran and Central Asia: A Cultural Perspective”. *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, 4(1) 2014: 123, 134.

in Pakaein, Mohsen. *Čahār sāl dar Sarzamīn-e Teymūr: Hāterāt-e safīr-e sābeq-e Īrān dar Ozbakestān (1374-1378)* [Four Years in the Land of Tamerlane: Recollections of Iran’s Former Ambassador to Uzbekistan (~1995-1999)] Oral History Unit, Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS) Tehran, 2010.: 247.

in Koolae, Elahieh. “Security Links of Afghanistan and Tajikistan”. *Amu Darya: The Iranian Journal of Central Asian Studies*, 6(13) 2002/2003: 385-386.

in Mehran, Golnar. “The Presentation of the “Self” and the “Other” in Postrevolutionary Iranian School Textbooks” in Keddie, Nikki R; Matthee, Rudi (Eds.) *Iran and the Surrounding World: Interactions in Culture and Cultural Politics*. University of Washington Press. 2011: 247.

<sup>196</sup> Behbudi Nejad, Ghodrattollah. “The Economic Plans of the Great Powers in Central Asia: Implications for Iran”. *Jadavpur Journal of International Relations*, 26(2) 2022: 172.

<sup>197</sup> See Mousavi, Seyyed Rasoul. “Naqš-e manteqe-garā’ī dar modīriyat-e bohrān-hā-ye manteqe’ī” [The role of regionalism in the management of regional crises]. *Moṭāle’āt-e Asīyā-ye markazī va Qafqāz*. 15(5) fall 1996: 43-60.



On the whole, the euphoria of seeing newly-independent polities ostensibly belonging to Iran's own civilizational sphere quickly gave way to a rush towards securitization.

Related to the Islamic Republic's readiness to become the region's conflict mediator and regional crisis problem solver is the discursive strategy employed by decisionmakers in Tehran, and educated Iranian more generally, professing the imperative that Iran is to regain its 'natural' eminent standing in Eurasia. This would-be natural state of affairs is bolstered by a historical memory of ostensibly-Iranian empires that at times contained also the southern slopes of the Greater Caucasus, as well as the valleys and oases of Central Asia, south of the vast Eurasian steppe. Iran's footprint could—independently of geopolitical realities of a given time—consist of the role Persian language served as an elite *lingua franca* and how Islam was adopted by various Turkic groups through Persian cultural mediation, to the extent that Persian would come to be the main language of religious scholarship among many Kipchak sub-groups functionally until the modern period.<sup>198</sup> In the post-Cold War era, the main utility of geography shifts specifically to the Iranian plateau being assertively pitched by Iranian officials as the shortest transit route for the landlocked Eurasian republics to access global shipping routes (conveyed by the mental image of '*āb-hā-ye āzād*', Persian for 'free waters').<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Pakaein, Mohsen. *Čahār sāl dar Sarzamīn-e Teymūr: Hāṭerāt-e safīr-e sābeq-e Īrān dar Ozbakestān (1374-1378)* [Four Years in the Land of Tamerlane: Recollections of Iran's Former Ambassador to Uzbekistan (~1995-1999)] Oral History Unit, Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS) Tehran, 2010: 199, 226.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 33-34.

*B) A less granular level of analysis: Contemporary metanarratives of Iran–Central Eurasia relations*

As has been alluded to, an endogenous understanding of Iran’s unique geography is at least as important as an awareness of its historical and ‘civilizational’ role in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. These two notions propped by separate discursive strategies occasionally meet at a confluence to jointly bolster a metanarrative of Iran’s ‘natural’ share of regional leadership. The latter suggests that Iran would have had played a much greater role in the economic, political and cultural arenas of Central Eurasia, had ‘distorting’ variables—such as the legacies of the Great Game, Soviet central planning and an excessive orientation of the USSR’s infrastructure on Moscow—been overcome. This serves as an explanation—in light of the heuristic that geographic proximity is the strongest predictor of the relative volumes of trade—of the seemingly ‘unnaturally-low’ levels of trade between Iran and its northern neighbours, a state of affairs that is ‘yet to be rectified’.<sup>200</sup> The latter explanation gets vindicated by an awareness in Tehran that Washington has sought to prevent any large regional energy-infrastructure project that would seek to use Iranian territory from ever taking off ground.<sup>201</sup> The main discursive strategy to underscore this reality is one of juxtaposition. A ‘natural’ state of affairs of robust interpersonal, cultural and economic links transcending the once-imposing Soviet-era boundary—bolstered by Iran’s ‘auspicious geographical position’—has been

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<sup>200</sup> Sanaei, Mehdi. *Vzaimootnošeniya Irana i Tsentral’noi Azii: Tendentsii i perspektivy* [Iran–Central Asia Relations: Trends and Outlooks] Sadra, 2017 (Translated from 2011 Tehran-published Persian-language original): 4.

<sup>201</sup> Meshkini, Qadir Nasri. “Challenges and Imperatives of the Iranian Policy in Central Asia”. *Amu Darya: The Iranian Journal of Central Asian Studies*, 4(5) 2000: 81-82.  
Maleki, Abbas. “Iran”. in Starr, Frederick (Ed.) *The New Silk Roads: Transport and Trade in Greater Central Asia*. Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, 2007: 179

impeded. Geography is outmanoeuvred by geopolitics, so to speak.<sup>202</sup> The ‘natural’ character of the former is juxtaposed here against the supposed ‘distortionary artificiality’ of the latter.

While in this worldview Iran’s considerable regional potential is constantly undermined by actors external to the immediate region, not least the aforementioned United States, infrastructure projects are way of leveraging Iran’s geography. The Iranian plateau lies at the intersection of the Persian Gulf, the Indian subcontinent, Central Eurasia—centred on the Caspian Sea—and the Eastern Mediterranean. Featuring a transport network linking up the latter regions is seen as a way to compensate for Iran’s own current economic deficiencies and to help the country overcome US sanctions, as overland trade is much harder than global shipping to monitor and therefore be able to subject to financial penalties.<sup>203</sup> Iran becoming a Eurasian transport hub is suggested as a model of socioeconomic development, one serving as an alternative to the current heavily-reliant-on-hydrocarbon-exports one.<sup>204</sup> The benefit of having an entire new politically-independent tract of neighbouring territory was a wider range of opportunities to escape international isolation.<sup>205</sup> This continues, albeit to a lesser extent, to this day, as shown during then-President Trump’s national security adviser John Bolton’s 2018 visit of the three South Caucasian republics. On that occasion, the aforementioned US official’s appeals to Tbilisi,

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<sup>202</sup> Karami, Jahangir; Karimian, Alireza. “Īrān va Āsiyā-ye Markazī: Ravand-hā-ye manṭeqe’ī va ḥašm-andāz-e āyande” [Iran and Central Asia: Regional Processes and Future Outlook]. *Sīyāsāt-e Jahān/World Politics*, 6(3) 1396/2017: 57-59.

<sup>203</sup> Kozhanov, Nikolay. *Iran’s Strategic Thinking: The Evolution of Iran’s Foreign Policy, 1979-2018*. Gerlach Press. Berlin, Germany. 2018: 105-106

<sup>204</sup> Karami, Jahangir; Karimian, Alireza. “Īrān va Āsiyā-ye Markazī: Ravand-hā-ye manṭeqe’ī va ḥašm-andāz-e āyande” [Iran and Central Asia: Regional Processes and Future Outlook]. *Sīyāsāt-e Jahān/World Politics*, 6(3) 1396/2017: 52.

<sup>205</sup> Kazemi, Farhad; Ajdari, Zohreh. “Ethnicity, Identity and Politics: Central Asia and Azerbaijan between Iran and Turkey”. in Menashri, David (Ed.) *Central Asia Meets the Middle East*. London; Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1998: 62.

Yerevan and Baku to join the US economic sanctions regime against Iran were firmly rebuffed.<sup>206</sup>

In reality, post-Soviet Central Eurasia as whole carries multiple, often competing, associations in Tehran. One of the most pervasive discursive strategies used in official Iranian rhetoric concerning (what the Islamic Republic sees as) sub-regions of its own immediate neighbourhood—the Persian Gulf region as well as Central Asia or the Caucasus—is creating and perpetuating an ‘us versus them’ dichotomy. Any action in Iran’s neighbourhood is deemed legitimate only if it is carried out by ostensibly ‘regional actors’, all of whom have a collective duty to push ‘extra-regional actors’ out or to prevent the latter from gaining a foothold to begin with. Unsurprisingly, the Islamic Republic gets to define which state belongs to which category. Terms used for ‘meddling’ non-regional actors include ‘*qodrat-hā-ye farā-manteqe’ī*’ (literally ‘extra-regional powers’),<sup>207</sup> ‘*anāšor-e sālēsī*’ (‘third parties/elements’),<sup>208</sup> and specific references are made to ‘*dehālat-e bīgānegān dar manteqe*’ (‘regional interference of outsiders’), ‘*tarfand-hā-ye kešvar-hā-ye sālēs*’ (‘scheming of third countries’) and ‘*tamāyolāt-e kešvar-hā-ye farā-manteqe’ī*’ (‘the predilections of extra-regional countries’).<sup>209</sup> While Tehran policymakers and foreign-policy establishment are quick to frame seemingly-innocuous non-regional players’ economic and political forays into Central Eurasia as instances of ‘external meddling’,

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<sup>206</sup> Kaleji, Vali. *Current Trends in the Political and Security Dimension of the South Caucasus: A View from Iran*. Institute for Security Policy (ISP) Working Paper, Center for Strategic Studies (CSS) Vienna. 2020: 15.

<sup>207</sup> Karami, Jahangir; Karimian, Alireza. “Īrān va Āsīyā-ye Markazī: Ravand-hā-ye manteqe’ī va čašm-andāz-e āyande” [Iran and Central Asia: Regional Processes and Future Outlook]. *Sīyāsāt-e Jahān/World Politics*, 6(3) 1396/2017: 41.

<sup>208</sup> Pakaein, Mohsen. *Čahār sāl-e ān sū-ye Aras: Hāterāt-e Mohsen-e Pāk-āyīn (Dowrān-e sefārat dar Jomhūrī-ye Āzarbāyjān)* [Four Years on the Other Side of the Aras: Recollections of Mohsen Pakaein (The Period at the Embassy in the Republic of Azerbaijan)] Oral History Unit, Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS) Tehran, 2019: 143.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 129.

neighbouring players are given much more leeway. This is done by means of discursive strategies of ‘downplaying’. A case in point was the escalation of heated rhetoric ‘on both sides of the Aras’, linked to Baku’s hosting of the 2012 instalment of the Eurovision Song Contest. The dispute was quickly reframed by the Islamic Republic’s ambassador to Baku as being due to a mere ‘misunderstanding’ (*sū’-e tafahhom*),<sup>210</sup> rather than an expression of fundamentally divergent political systems and associated societal outlooks and aspirations prevalent in the Republic of Azerbaijan and Iran respectively. The utility of the ‘extra-regional versus regional’ dichotomy is in discursively delegitimizing any presence of the United States or of Israel—the latter not being framed as a Levantine polity, but rather a fundamentally alien occupying body—in Iran’s neighbourhood and concomitantly legitimizing Iran’s regionalist ambitions, such as the Tehran-promoted ECO.

A supplementary utility of the aforementioned dichotomization is in externalising the sources of Iran’s main problems. In continuation of trends from the decade of the Iranian Revolution, internal problems are often attributed to nefarious Western influence—one that goes far beyond economic sanctions—which supposedly sows discord within the *Umma* and threatens to cause moral decay in Iran proper.<sup>211</sup> A more recent, no-less-closely-associated concept is that of ‘*jang-e narm*’ (literally ‘soft war’). The latter conceptually coincides with the notion of ‘colour revolutions’ occurring in Eurasia, ostensibly orchestrated by the US foreign-policy establishment and secret services. In those Central Eurasian countries where a self-admitted colour revolution had succeeded, resulting in a pro-US administration (such as had been the

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<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 108-109.

<sup>211</sup> Najmabadi, Afshaneh. “Iran’s Turn to Islam: From Modernism to a Moral Order”. *The Middle East Journal*, 41(2) 1987: 208.

case in Georgia in late-2003) relations with Tehran would tend to get strained, albeit not in a lasting way.<sup>212</sup> In this opposition to the emergence of pro-Western post-Soviet republics, Tehran's interests align with those of Moscow. Another, similarly-unifying, ostensibly-nefarious trend is the spread of the transnational ideology of pan-Turkism. Not only is this political movement and popular sentiment deemed corrosive for Iran's internal stability—should it even gain any meaningful foothold in Iran's Azerbaijani-Turkish-speaking provinces—but also, perhaps even more so, a potentially powerful geopolitical force. A secular alternative to an affinity to an 'Iranian-Islamic civilization' (itself paradoxically a semi-secularized form of the Islamic-universalist ideological appeals of the first years of the Islamic Republic),<sup>213</sup> a wide adoption of a pan-Turkist political programme would bring about a geopolitical alliance stretching from the Balkans to the western border of China. Russia, Iran, Armenia and Tajikistan would be the biggest geopolitical losers of such a hypothetical development. Pan-Turkism appears to coincide—not by pure chance, according to Tehran's policy establishment—with a more pro-Western geopolitical orientation, as well as more favourable views of Israel.<sup>214</sup> Such excessive fears may help explain Iran's aforementioned fiery rhetoric pertaining to the topic of the so-called Zangezur corridor. If it were to be achieved by Baku by military means, it would effectively cut Iran off from Armenia and ensure an uninterrupted strip of land under 'Turkic sovereignty' all the way to the Caspian.

Another calculation associated with developing close ties with the post-Soviet republics of the South Caucasus and Central Asia following the disintegration of the

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<sup>212</sup> Wastnidge, Edward. "The Modalities of Iranian Soft Power: From Cultural Diplomacy to Soft War". *Politics*. 2014: 2.

<sup>213</sup> Kiani, Davood. "Iran and Central Asia: A Cultural Perspective". *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, 4(1) 2014: 134.

<sup>214</sup> Moradian, Igor. "The Geo-economy of the "Great Economic Region": Iran-Armenia Relations". *Amu Darya: The Iranian Journal of Central Asian Studies*. 4(2) 1999: 174.

Soviet Union is the expected emergence of something resembling a ‘Greater Middle East’. The relative weight of the Arab states would be diluted and the comparative weight of non-Arab Muslims countries such as Iran and Turkey (so far regionally confined to the physical and conceptual margins) strengthened.<sup>215</sup> Failures to integrate said regions, over the course of the past three decades, into an Iranian-centred geopolitical and geoeconomic region are not always associated with externalization of blame. More critical analysts in Tehran admit that Iran’s technological and economic weakness and a largely-uninvolved private sector are behind the country not having fulfilled its historic potential and gained a foothold commensurate with its geographical, cultural and historical assets.<sup>216</sup> This implies a view of both material and immaterial connectivity falling short, as far as Iran is concerned. The same authors also bemoan Tehran’s position of de facto having no other choice than to defer to Moscow on all major matters pertaining to Central Eurasia, in a ‘junior partner’ capacity.<sup>217</sup>

After a decade of ideological posturing of the revolutionary regime, elites in Tehran quickly realize the importance of cultivating closer ties with fellow inheritors of the aforementioned ‘Iranian-Islamic civilization’. The reinvigoration and expansion of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) in the early 1990s shows this was not mere posturing, as, from among the three South Caucasian republics, the offer of ECO membership was extended only to the Republic of Azerbaijan.<sup>218</sup> While ECO co-founding members Turkey and Pakistan refused to establish diplomatic relations with Armenia due to the Karabakh dispute, Georgia—the only other Christian-majority

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<sup>215</sup> Menashri, David. “Iran and Central Asia: Radical Regime, Pragmatic Politics”, in Menashri, David (Ed.) *Central Asia Meets the Middle East*. London; Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1998: 78.

<sup>216</sup> Karami, Jahangir; Karimian, Alireza. “Īrān va Āsiyā-ye Markazī: Ravand-hā-ye manteqe’ī va čāšm-andāz-e āyande” [Iran and Central Asia: Regional Processes and Future Outlook]. *Sīyāsāt-e Jahān/World Politics*, 6(3) 1396/2017: 56.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 47.

polity in the region—has no such issue, yet it was not considered for ECO membership either. The Islamic Republic therefore seems to stand by its founding commitments enshrined in its constitution and privileges ties specifically with other Muslim countries, all things being equal. The intersubjective quality of regional politics should therefore not be dismissed.

*C) A more granular level of analysis: Vectors of Iranian discernment in Iran–Central Eurasia relations*

In terms of the ‘regional’ versus ‘extra-regional’ dichotomy, another expedient distinction is employed by Tehran between the republics to the west and to the east of the Caspian. Turkey, for instance, is explicitly a ‘regional power’ when matters pertaining to the South Caucasus are discussed, but often an ‘extra-regional power’ when Central Asia is being covered.<sup>219</sup> This is the case despite four out of the five Central Asian republics having a Turkic language as the official language, as well as having them as the native language of the respective titular nations. By analogy it is likely China would be considered ‘of the region’ in Central Asia, but no longer so in the case of the South Caucasus.<sup>220</sup> None of the Persian Gulf states are considered ‘of the region’, which is expedient for Iran’s discursive strategy of legitimization of its own efforts to minimize Saudi influence in Central Eurasia, not least in the religious sphere.

If one were to impose one main discerning avenue, in terms of the role the South Caucasus, on the one hand, and Central Asia, on the other hand, play in Iranian elite imagination, the chief discriminating logic would follow a chronological axis. As was

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<sup>219</sup> Hafez Nia, Mohammad Reza. “Strategic Role of the Caucasus-Central Asia Axis in Global Competition”. *Amu Darya: The Iranian Journal of Central Asian Studies*. 7(14/15) 2003: 45.

<sup>220</sup> There is no reason for Tehran elites to bring this up as the Islamic Republic would defer to the Chinese, all while entertaining a low-intensity rivalry with Turkey.



shown in the first section of this chapter, parts of Central Asia and the South Caucasus are deemed almost equally important for Iranian self-identity, but the two sub-regions are associated with fundamentally non-overlapping periods of Iranian history. Territories now associated with Central Asia, deemed an extension of Khorasan, had played a key role in the genesis of the New Persian language from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> century and had been the home of a large portion of Persian scholars and poets of the mediaeval period, as well as the Persian-speaking historical cities of Samarqand, Bukhara and Merv.<sup>221</sup> Conversely, the South Caucasus and the adjacent cities of Iranian Azerbaijan have been a vector both of the official near-universal introduction of Twelver Shiism to the Iranian plateau in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, as well as of European-inspired modernity some three-and-a-half centuries later (see pages 52-53).

It can be argued that events that had transpired in the northwest of Iran—adjacent to the South Caucasus—exactly mid-way through the second millennium CE, initiated the severing of links in the northeast—i.e. with Central Asia. Persian-speaking Central Asian scholars framed Iran’s conversion to Shiism as the starting point of a cultural divergence between the Persian speakers of the Iranian plateau from the Persian speakers of those of Central Asia who largely remained Sunni Muslims affiliated with the Hanafi school.<sup>222</sup> The conversion’s tradeoff has been, as Rudi Matthee argues, a newfound coherence given to the bulk of Iranian territory. This coherence was paradoxically further consolidated with the loss of Dagestan to the Russians and of Herat to the Afghans—with considerable British aid in the latter case. Within

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<sup>221</sup> The city of Merv had never truly recovered from its destruction by the Mongols in 1221 while the Merv oasis had, some five-and-a-half centuries later, been depopulated of its Persian-speaking population by the forces of the Manghit emir of Bukhara.

<sup>222</sup> See Bečka, Jiří. “Tajik Literature from the 16th Century to the Present”. in Rypka, Jan (Ed.) *History of Iranian Literature*. 1968: 483-606.  
Hulstine, Matthew. “Where Persian Ends and Tajik Begins: Sadriddin Ayni and Language Reform in Early Soviet Tajikistan”. Masters’ Thesis for Indiana University, September 2019: 8.

contemporary Central Asia, there are clear differentials of perceived cultural affinity informed by history. The oases and cities of southern Uzbekistan and the valleys of western Tajikistan would be deemed as still-more-closely-integrated into the purported ‘Iranian-Islamic civilization’ than the deserts and steppes historically inhabited by Oghuz and Kipchak nomads respectively. In both Iranian elite and popular imagination the strongest historical association with Central Asia—arguably besides the opening rhyming couplet of Hafez’s most famous ghazal<sup>223</sup>—is nevertheless the feuding ‘Iran–Turan’ dyad, eternalized in Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh*. Despite the political fragmentation of contemporary Central Asia, the literary *topos* of ‘Iran versus Turan’ would still occasionally get mobilized on both sides.<sup>224</sup>

When it comes to the South Caucasus, most notably the Republic of Azerbaijan, linguistic links are mentioned, albeit to nowhere near the same extent as with Central Asia. The northern parts of the aforementioned Caucasian republic, as well as of southern Dagestan still feature pockets of Tat speakers, their population formerly populating both the northern and the southern slopes the southeastmost stretch of the Greater Caucasus all the way to the Absheron peninsula and the city of Baku. Tats are believed to descend from Sassanid-era settlers deployed to fortify the Empire’s northern border.<sup>225</sup> It thus follows that Tat (not to be confused with largely-unrelated northwestern Iranian Tati, spoken in Iran and likely descended from Old *Āzarī*) may have descended from Middle Persian, rather than being a more recent offshoot of New

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<sup>223</sup> The couplet *agar ān Tork-e Šīrāzī be dast ārad del-e mā-rā/be ḥāl-e Hendū-yaš baḥšam Samarqand-o-Boḥārā-rā* extolls the beauty of a beloved by comparing the worth of the latter’s birthmark alone to the combined riches, much-renowned at the period, of Samarqand and Bukhara.

<sup>224</sup> Notice the title of Maleki, Abbas. “Iran and Turan: A Proposal of Iran’s Relation with Central Asia and Caucasus Republics”. *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, 11(5) 2001.

<sup>225</sup> Suleymanov, Murad. “Tat, an Endangered Language of Azerbaijan, and Its Speakers: A Historical and Sociolinguistic Overview”. *Tehlikedeki Diller Dergisi/Journal of Endangered Languages*, 13(22) 2023: 187.

Persian. This does not stop state-affiliated organs, such as the Dehkhoda Lexicon Institute, to use the example of Tat as evidence, in a somewhat misleading fashion, of the sheer geographic spread of New Persian.<sup>226</sup> When it comes to the southern banks of the Aras, Iranian elites are still relying on early-20<sup>th</sup> century historian Ahmad Kasravi's assertion that the population of Iranian Azerbaijan descends from only 'superficially Turkified' speakers of the Northwestern Iranian idiom of Old *Āzarī*.<sup>227</sup> The linguistic necessity to disambiguate the Republic of Azerbaijan from Iranian Azerbaijan is itself a relatively new phenomenon—dating back to the proclamation of the short-lived Azerbaijan Democratic Republic of 1918-1920, a name for territories hitherto never associated with the toponym. Neither the Aras River, nor the Russo-Persian border served as an imposing barrier at least until the overrunning of the later polity by the Bolsheviks, as ideas associated with modernity emanating from Europe, such as the 'nation-state', 'constitutional order' and similar phenomena filtered into Tabriz (and, with some delay, Tehran) from Russian-controlled Caucasus from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, be it the case of the aforementioned writings of Āḥundzāde, or the representatives of the constitutional movement some decades later.<sup>228</sup>

<sup>226</sup> “Kodām kešvar-hā be zabān-e Fārsī šohbat mīkonand?” [Which countries speak Persian?]. *Mo'asseseye zabān-e Dehḥodā*. URL: [www.dehkhodaedu.com/%DA%A9%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%85-%DA%A9%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%B1-%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%B2%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B3%DB%8C-%D8%B5%D8%AD%D8%A8%D8%AA-%D9%85%DB%8C-%DA%A9%D9%86%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%9F/](http://www.dehkhodaedu.com/%DA%A9%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%85-%DA%A9%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%B1-%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%B2%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B3%DB%8C-%D8%B5%D8%AD%D8%A8%D8%AA-%D9%85%DB%8C-%DA%A9%D9%86%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%9F/)

<sup>227</sup> Hunter, Shireen. “Azerbaijan: Search for Identity and New Partners”. in Bremmer, Ian; Taras, Ray (Eds.) *Nation and Politics in the Soviet Successor States*. Cambridge University Press, 1993: 235. The examined Iranian discourse appears not to concern itself, especially in comparison to the Baku-Azerbaijani national elite discourse examined in the following chapter, with the border-straddling Talysh people. The latter Iranic group inhabits Azerbaijan's tiny ‘panhandle’ protruding south of the Aras River and the adjacent territories of Iranian Azerbaijan and speak a language belonging to the same dialect-continuum as the Caspian languages of Gilan and Mazandaran.

<sup>228</sup> See Zia-Ebrahimi, Reza. *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism: Race and the Politics of Dislocation*, New York, 2016. and Atabaki, Touraj. *Azerbaijan: Ethnicity and the Struggle for Power in Iran*. London : I.B. Tauris. 2000

Focusing specifically on the most important countries, at least in terms of demographics and military strength, of their own respective sub-regions—the Republic of Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan—there is a key difference in discourse produced by Iranian officials. While the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict created a rift between Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan, the conflicts in Tajikistan from 1992 to 1997 and the civil war in Afghanistan brought Tehran and Tashkent closer together in certain ways, despite Iran and Uzbekistan supporting opposing sides of the civil war in Tajikistan. In both the case of Karabakh and Tajikistan, Tehran sought to provide mediation to the warring sides, albeit with success only in the latter case.<sup>229</sup> The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, in both of its large-scale military iterations, also revealed divides within the Iranian elite. Mouthpieces of conservative factions in the early 1990s would cautiously express pro-Azerbaijani sentiments, unlike the foreign-policy mainstream, whose pragmatism pushes them to espouse a cautious, yet *de facto* pro-Armenian, stance, especially after Elchibey's Iran-alienating rise to power.<sup>230</sup> The internal workings and attitudes within the Islamic Republic establishment also reveal a nuanced understanding of post-Soviet affairs. Various briefings of then-ambassador to Tashkent by highest-level government officials such as the foreign minister Velayati, as well as President Hashemi-Rafsanjani indicate an impressive familiarity with the Karimov regime in Uzbekistan. The latter leader is seen as a shrewd leader, one inherently distrustful of all

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<sup>229</sup> See Pakaein, Mohsen. *Čahār sāl dar Sarzamīn-e Teymūr: Hāṭerāt-e safīr-e sābeq-e Īrān dar Ozbakestān (1374-1378)* [Four Years in the Land of Tamerlane: Recollections of Iran's Former Ambassador to Uzbekistan (~1995-1999)] Oral History Unit, Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS) Tehran, 2010: 187.

and Pakaein, Mohsen. *Čahār sāl-e ān sū-ye Aras: Hāṭerāt-e Moḥsen-e Pāk-āyīn (Dowrān-e sefārat dar Jomhūrī-ye Āzarbāyjān)* [Four Years on the Other Side of the Aras: Recollections of Mohsen Pakaein (The Period at the Embassy in the Republic of Azerbaijan)] Oral History Unit, Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS) Tehran, 2019: 143.

<sup>230</sup> Kouhi-Esfahani, Marzieh. *Iran's Foreign Policy in the South Caucasus*. Routledge. 2019: 106-108.  
Menashri, David. "Iran and Central Asia: Radical Regime, Pragmatic Politics", in Menashri, David (Ed.) *Central Asia Meets the Middle East*. London; Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1998: 79-80.

neighbouring countries—rendering Uzbekistan ‘a particularly disagreeable neighbour’—all while aspiring to turn his own country into a regional leader. The ins-and-outs of diplomatic life also betray revealed preferences of the Iranian elite establishment. Inordinate amounts of then-ambassador Pakaein’s time in Uzbekistan has been spent on trips to Samarqand.<sup>231</sup> Conversely, the official reveals that Iran’s ministry of foreign affairs deploys a ‘good cop, bad cop’ tactic *vis-à-vis* their Baku counterparts. In years of low regional tension, an ethnic Azerbaijani is sent to Baku, while years of ‘lower agreeableness’ and poor bilateral relations typically warrant sending a natively-Persian-speaking Iranian official as ambassador to show Baku that ‘Tehran means business’.<sup>232</sup>

A closer look reveals further internal ‘vectors of discernment’. Iran’s South Caucasus policy is clearly much more important to national actors with vested interests in Iranian Azerbaijan and Gilan, while the central Caspian Province of Mazandaran, alongside its neighbours, is deeply invested in Caspian shipping links. The historical region with the most acute sensitivity to the maintenance of good relations with post-Soviet Central Asia is nonetheless Khorasan—now split between three official provinces with Razavi Khorasan—seat of the aforementioned powerful *Āstān-e Qods-e Rażavī* foundation at its centre—and, to a lesser extent, Golestan Province.<sup>233</sup> Concrete examples include the descriptions of trade delegations of the Georgian region of Imereti engaging with their counterparts from Gilan Province, as well as of a trade exhibition featuring Mazandaran Province in the city of Tashkent. Further bilateral ties on a sub-

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

<sup>232</sup> Pakaein, Mohsen. *Čahār sāl-e ān sū-ye Aras: Hāterāt-e Mohsen-e Pāk-āyīn (Dowrān-e sefārat dar Jomhūrī-ye Āzarbāyjān* [Four Years on the Other Side of the Aras: Recollections of Mohsen Pakaein (The Period at the Embassy in the Republic of Azerbaijan)] Oral History Unit, Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS) Tehran, 2019: 5-6.

<sup>233</sup> See issues of the Mashhad-based *Pažūhešnāme-ye Ĥorāsān-e bozorg* [Research Journal of the Greater Khorasan]. URL: [jgk.imamreza.ac.ir/](http://jgk.imamreza.ac.ir/)

state level are mention for Golestan–Kazakhstan relations and Mazandaran–Turkmenistan relations, as well as those between East Azerbaijan in Iran and Tatarstan in Russia.<sup>234</sup> Within Iran itself, particular regional attachments are in place *vis-à-vis* the respective adjacent bodies of water and territories ‘on the other side’. Government-issued map-outlines of the Islamic Republic of Iran feature both the ‘northern’ body of water (i.e. the Caspian Sea) and the ‘southern’ bodies of water—namely the Persian Gulf and the Sea of Oman—in their near entirety, far beyond a mere framing of the terrestrial borders of Iran (See Figure n.3). This indicates that in the elite imagination, the Caspian and the aforementioned Indian Ocean inlets is very much an extension of Iran itself. Therefore official rhetoric of Russia and Kazakhstan being Iran’s *de facto* neighbours is not inconsistent with this self-perception.<sup>235</sup>

The last vector of discernment within the bounds of Iran’s policy towards Central Eurasia is the factor of religious denomination. The vast majority of the Muslims of the South Caucasus are Twelver Shias—just like the majority of Iranians—while the vast majority of Central Asians are *Ḥanafī* Sunni. This, combined with Baku’s still relatively-recent existence as a nominal part of the Qajar Iranian state, leads to a degree of entitlement of Iran’s side to comment on the Republic of Azerbaijan’s internal matters to degrees that would be simply inconceivable in the case of any Central Asian

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<sup>234</sup> “Mīz-e gerd: avvalin mīz-e gerd-e Īrān va Gorjestān - Tehrān 18 - 20 šahrīyar-māh 1375” [Roundtable: First Iran–Georgia roundtable - 18 - 20 šahrīyar 1375]. *Moṭāle’āt-e Asiyā-ye markazī va Qafqāz*. 15(5) fall 1996: 296.

Pakaein, Mohsen. *Čahār sāl-e ān sū-ye Aras: Ḥāterāt-e Moḥsen-e Pāk-āyīn (Dowrān-e sefārat dar Jomhūrī-ye Āzarbāyjān)* [Four Years on the Other Side of the Aras: Recollections of Mohsen Pakaein (The Period at the Embassy in the Republic of Azerbaijan)] Oral History Unit, Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS) Tehran, 2019: 90-91.

Maleki, Abbas. “Iran”, in Starr, Frederick (Ed.) *The New Silk Roads: Transport and Trade in Greater Central Asia*. Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, 2007: 178.

“Tatarstan, Iran should triple bilateral cooperation: Tatar minister”. *IRNA*. URL: [en.irna.ir/news/84864652/Tatarstan-Iran-should-triple-bilateral-cooperation-Tatar-minister](http://en.irna.ir/news/84864652/Tatarstan-Iran-should-triple-bilateral-cooperation-Tatar-minister)

<sup>235</sup> Sajjadpour, Seyed Kazem. “Iran, the Caucasus and Central Asia”, in Banuazizi, Ali; Meiner, Myron (Eds.) *The New Geopolitics of Central Asia and Its Borderlands*. I.B. Tauris, London. 1994: 198.

republic. This creates apprehension in Baku about the Shia factor being used as a leveraging point. In practical terms, the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Baku during Mohsen Pakaein's tenure would routinely release statements suggesting that more religiously devoted segments of Azerbaijan's Shia Muslim majority were underserved by the state and facing administrative harassment: "By virtue of Azerbaijan being a Muslim-majority country, it is only natural that it will be held to certain standards by the Muslim world, not least by Iran."<sup>236</sup> President Ilham Aliyev's response to analogous comments would be along the lines of "Shia Muslims represent the majority of this country's population, and nearly all of them voted for me, so the criticism from Iran is a moot point."<sup>237</sup> Iran's explicitly-religious state ideology favours shared religious denomination over linguistic commonality, as Azerbaijan—rather than Persian-speaking Tajikistan—is cited as the culturally closest contemporary polity by members of the Iranian establishment.<sup>238</sup> The last distinguishing feature of how the South Caucasus is perceived in Iran versus how is Central Asia perceived is the advanced degree of successful westernization or 'European-ness' of the former. While this could be explained by the fact that Armenia and Georgia are both nominally Christian nations—a fact instrumentalized in Iranian public messaging, citing Tehran's close relations with both Yerevan and Tbilisi as disproving Huntington's 'Clash of Civilization' thesis<sup>239</sup>—it fails to account for analogous Iranian views of the Republic of

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<sup>236</sup> Pakaein, Mohsen. *Čahār sāl-e ān sū-ye Aras: Hāterāt-e Mohsen-e Pāk-āyīn (Dowrān-e sefārat dar Jomhūrī-ye Āzarbāyjān)* [Four Years on the Other Side of the Aras: Recollections of Mohsen Pakaein (The Period at the Embassy in the Republic of Azerbaijan)] Oral History Unit, Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS) Tehran, 2019: 208.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 46.

This would not necessarily be a belief shared with more ethnonationalistically-oriented Iranians

<sup>239</sup> See "Mīz-e gerd: avvalin mīz-e gerd-e Īrān va Gorjestān - Tehrān 18 - 20 šahrīyar-māh 1375" [Roundtable: First Iran–Georgia roundtable - 18 - 20 šahrīyar 1375]. *Moṭāle'āt-e Asīyā-ye markazī va Qafqāz*. 15(5) fall 1996.

Azerbaijan.<sup>240</sup> The underlying unstated implication is that the elites in the Republic of Azerbaijan are a ‘lost cause’, a case in point of *‘garb-zadegī’*,<sup>241</sup> with the important caveat that the ‘affliction’ has featured Russia in the role of the chief intermediary.

One can talk of a *topos* of symbiosis in the post-independence period, where the Central Eurasian republics help Tehran improve its own regional standing, escape international isolation and weaken the impact of sanctions, all while Iran itself offers the landlocked republics with the shortest and most convenient outlet to international shipping markets. Another central feature is much of post-Soviet Central Eurasia representing formerly ‘off-limits’ tracts of the ‘Iranian-Islamic civilization’, now open to regional overtures formulated on cultural grounds. Tehran’s ‘northern’ regional policy vector is chiefly informed by pragmatic considerations, something that may not necessarily be the case in other regional policy vectors. Iran’s use of an ‘extra-regional’ vs ‘regional player’ rhetorical dichotomy is purely self-serving and is extremely unlikely to alter the behaviour any relevant state actor. Lastly, the extreme denominational and historical affinity with the Republic of Azerbaijan felt in Tehran may at times go against Tehran’s stated guiding principle of refraining from meddling—outside of exceptional contexts of security crises and conflict mediation—in the matters of other sovereign states of the region.

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<sup>240</sup> Kiani, Davood. “Iran and Central Asia: A Cultural Perspective”. *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, 4(1) 2014: 134.

Pakaein, Mohsen. *Čahār sāl-e ān sū-ye Aras: Hāterāt-e Mohsen-e Pāk-āyīn (Dowrān-e sefārat dar Jomhūrī-ye Āzarbāyjān)* [Four Years on the Other Side of the Aras: Recollections of Mohsen Pakaein (The Period at the Embassy in the Republic of Azerbaijan)] Oral History Unit, Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS) Tehran, 2019: 8.

<sup>241</sup> This neologism, popularized by mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Iranian intellectual Jalal Al-e-Ahmad, conveys a state of ‘contracting a pathological need to ape the West’



#### IV) The standing of immaterial links with Iran in the respective nationbuilding trajectories of the republics of Central Eurasia

The political leadership of much of post-Soviet Central Eurasia has subscribed, at least nominally, to ‘Western-style’ modernization trajectories and political models,<sup>242</sup> albeit coloured by a Soviet-Russian prism.<sup>243</sup> This recent historical layer nonetheless does not fully override the ‘cultural capital’ that still immaterially links the aforementioned region—especially its Muslim-majority polities—to countries further afield, such as Iran and Turkey. Iran has the long-term asset of the crucial role that New Persian language and Persianate elite culture—ranging from architecture, figurative art and literature to state bureaucracy—had played in these territories for roughly a millennium.<sup>244</sup> To this one can add even more ancient legacies of pre-Islamic Iran such as the celebration of *Nowruz*,<sup>245</sup> as one can also add Tehran’s rule over parts of the South Caucasus as recently as the early-19<sup>th</sup> century, in case of the territories of the Republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan.<sup>246</sup>

Some acknowledgement is in order of the use—past or present—of the New Persian language, the identification with region-specific myths and epics such as the *Shahnameh* and the celebration of the Persian New Year not being something beholden to—or monopolizable by—a single modern country. One nevertheless also needs to

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<sup>242</sup> This is exemplified by the republics’ continued membership in the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), their following of procedural formalities such as a nominal adherence to a multi-party electoral system, secularism and the emancipation of women.

<sup>243</sup> See Shin, Boram. “National Form and Socialist Content: Soviet Modernization and Making of Uzbek National Opera Between the 1920s and 1930s”. *International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 19(3) 2017: 416-433.

<sup>244</sup> By contrast, the Republic of Turkey has the Turkic ethnolinguistic link, as well as the still-attractive secular political and socioeconomic-development model.

<sup>245</sup> Or *Novruz*, *Navro* ‘z, *Nauryz* and *Nooruz*, as is the holiday’s name rendered in Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan respectively.

<sup>246</sup> Izady, Michael. Map “Territorial Changes of Persia/Iran in the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries”. 2004. URL: [www.cais-soas.com/CAIS/Images2/Maps/persia-territory-history.gif](http://www.cais-soas.com/CAIS/Images2/Maps/persia-territory-history.gif)

give some credit to the power that discourse on—and markers of—‘civilizational affinity’ can wield in regional state-to-state relations. Central Asia in particular has been argued to be a sub-region where national identity informs foreign policymaking to a particularly-substantial degree.<sup>247</sup> Looking at how have the fledgling republics, with their statebuilding and nationbuilding processes still underway, engaged with, reinterpreted, or downplayed the immaterial connectivity linking them with Iran is thus of interest and utility here. Because of nationbuilding in much of the post-Soviet world being a top-down process implemented in an authoritarian context, one can generally identify a singular hegemonic national discourse in each country, greatly streamlining scholarly investigations of the landscape. This also facilitates the ‘distillation’ of hegemonic nationbuilding discourse from my Baku and my Tashkent interviews, analysed in the following two chapters respectively.

Both geopolitical alignment and self-professed ‘civilizational affinity’ are variables that are in constant flux. For instance Turkey’s Westward trajectory has been increasingly challenged domestically, after four generations of often-violent Western-style modernization.<sup>248</sup> Ali Ansari makes a case that an analogous backlash against authoritarian modernization efforts in Pahlavi Iran produced the 1978-1979 Revolution.<sup>249</sup> As is discussed in the previous section, post-revolution Iran has variously been resorting to regional messaging centred on ‘Shia regional resistance’ as well as that centred on collective belonging to an ‘Iranian-Islamic civilization’. It seems

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<sup>247</sup> Laruelle, Marlene; Peyrouse, Sebastien. *Globalizing Central Asia: Geopolitics and the Challenges of Economic Development*. Routledge, Abingdon, New York, 2013: 306-312.

<sup>248</sup> As an example, see Heijs, Duco. “The “Gardening States”: Comparing State Repression of Ethnic Minority Groups in Turkey and the Soviet Union”, 1908-1945, Master’s thesis in History, Utrecht University, supervised by Dr. Uğur Ümit Üngür, 2017.

<sup>249</sup> See Ansari, Ali. *Modern Iran: Reform and Revolution*, 2nd Edition, Routledge, 2007.

inevitable that the somewhat-anomalous episode of rule from Moscow<sup>250</sup> will lose some of its conceptual prominence in post-Soviet Central Eurasia over time. The very recent new willingness in Uzbekistani and Kazakhstani academia to entertain the concept of ‘decolonization’ as an apt one to the local context might be a sign of this willingness to ‘move on’, however much it paradoxically lets the shadow of a past era dictate its terms and parameters.

Nationbuilding discourse in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, especially in Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan—where a meaningful distinction between, on the one hand, New Persian (or Tat) speakers and, on the other hand, sedentary Turkic speakers had been historically absent<sup>251</sup>—rely heavily on official, highly-reified historiographies’. State-sanctioned commemorations of historical events and characters reveal each respective autocratic leadership’s preferences, priorities, and the ‘place under the sun’ they envision for their respective nations. There is a case to be made that whenever immaterial connectivity hinging on a historical ‘Iranian and Persianate presence’ clashes with official nationbuilding narratives, any of Tehran’s overtures on cultural grounds will be a source of tension. Similarly, the odd ‘culturally-insensitive’ Iranian diplomat *faux pas* and over-the-top negative local reactions to the latter reveal biases and deeply-held beliefs pertaining to one’s national identity on both sides of the former Soviet border. Historical revisionism in the region is far from only ever addressing Iran. After all, the main task of the first three decades of independence of the aforementioned post-Soviet republics, especially in Central Asia, has been

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<sup>250</sup> or Saint Petersburg, if we include the period of Imperial rule.

<sup>251</sup> Suleymanov, Murad. “Tat, an Endangered Language of Azerbaijan, and Its Speakers: A Historical and Sociolinguistic Overview”. *Tehlikedeki Diller Dergisi/Journal of Endangered Languages*, 13(22) 2023: 188.

See Finke, Peter; Meltem Sancak, “To be an Uzbek or not to be a Tajik? Ethnicity and locality in the Bukhara Oasis”. *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, 137(1) 2012: 47-70.

constructing national identities in ways that would render them as distinct as possible, first and foremost, from their immediate neighbours.

I draw a basic typology here that uses territoriality and ethnicity as the two defining—often clashing—parameters of nationbuilding. The ‘strictly territorial’ model can be tracked back to France since the years of the Revolution. This conception, and the associated historiographies, was encouraged by the Soviet authorities, albeit not entertaining the scenario of any constituent *natsional’nost*<sup>252</sup> within the Union itself ever gaining political independence.<sup>253</sup> The latter model had been adopted and maintained most diligently upon independence by Uzbekistan, simultaneously a pragmatic reaction to—and reflection of—both geopolitical constraints and domestic imperatives.

*A) ‘Orthodox’ territorially-based nationbuilding: The case of Uzbekistan*

The modern-day republics of Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan have arguably had the most ambivalent and tense relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran, as well as arguably with their own respective Persianate cultural heritage. In addition to this, Baku and Tashkent share dismissive attitudes—whenever not outright exerting assimilatory pressures—*vis-à-vis* their main Southwestern-Iranian-speaking minority: the Tats and the Tajiks respectively.<sup>254</sup> As far as the genesis of an Uzbek ethnic consciousness and,

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<sup>252</sup> This Russian term designates an ‘ethnic group’, distinct from and ‘lower on the totem pole’ than *natsiya* (i.e. ‘full-fledged nation’), a distinction that reflects the prevailing-at-the-time Marxist historical-material dialectic in official use.

<sup>253</sup> Gürbüz, Y. Emre. “In Search of New Historiographies for Ex-Soviet. Turkic States: Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan” in Atabaki, Touraj; Mehendale, Sanjiyot (Eds.) *Central Asia and the Caucasus: Transnationalism and Diaspora*, London/New York, Routledge, 2009: 48.

There was a curious pro-forma requirement that any full-fledged Union republic must share a section of the USSR’s external border, for the then-utterly-theoretical scenario of peaceful secession.

<sup>254</sup> In addition, Azerbaijan has shown similar attitudes towards other non-Turkic groups within its territory, including the now-largely-assimilated Kurds, the Talysh (both groups speaking languages belonging to the north-western Iranian sub-family) and the ‘indigenous’ Lezgin and Udi people.

subsequently, of Uzbek nationhood is concerned, some features are nonetheless completely unique to this sole doubly-landlocked modern nation-state.<sup>255</sup>

The genesis of the notion of ‘Uzbek’ as a distinct ethnolinguistic category free from all tribal connotations dates back to the early years of Soviet rule to a politico-administrative process than took place throughout the Union—but especially in the Volga-Ural region, the North Caucasus and in Central Asia—known as *razmeževanie*.<sup>256</sup> What set the ethnogenesis of Uzbeks apart from that of its neighbours was their classification—started by *Jadid* intellectuals and pursued by Soviet ethnographers and ‘apparatchiks’—on grounds of ‘what they were not’, rather than the more common grouping based on shared ethnolinguistic characteristics. Simply put, an ‘Uzbek’—originally a tribal term traced back to the Golden Horde—came to mean any traditionally-sedentary Turkic-speaking native of Soviet-ruled Central Asia. These three criteria set Uzbeks apart from traditionally-(semi-)nomadic Kipchaks and Turkmens, from Tajiks, and from Uyghurs respectively.<sup>257</sup> This new category brought about a merger of two previously-used census categories: Sart—albeit purged of Persian speakers—and Uzbek proper, i.e. the original tribal designation.<sup>258</sup> Due to the low priority ascribed to the criterion of linguistic affinity, ‘Uzbek’ came to encompass the

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The appellation ‘Tat’, which rose to prominence as the Qizilbash-ruling-elite-appellation for Iranic-speaking subjects, has parallels to the use of the etymologically-unrelated word ‘Tajik’ in Central Asia. The latter is paradoxically derived from the term used by Iranic speakers to refer to Arabs, most likely derived from the endonym of the Tayy Bedouin tribal confederation.

<sup>255</sup> This is the case if one does not include the microstate of Lichtenstein.

<sup>256</sup> Friedrich, Otto. “Some Thoughts on the Making of the Uzbek Nation” in Atabaki, Touraj; Mehendale, Sanjiyot (Eds.) *Central Asia and the Caucasus: Transnationalism and Diaspora*, London/New York, Routledge, 2009: 91.

<sup>257</sup> Khalid, Adeeb. *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia*. University of California Press. Berkeley/Los Angeles/Oxford, 1998: 208.

See this monograph likewise for more on the aforementioned late-19<sup>th</sup>/early-20<sup>th</sup> century modernising intellectual movement.

<sup>258</sup> Friedrich, Otto. “Some Thoughts on the Making of the Uzbek Nation”. in Atabaki, Touraj; Mehendale, Sanjiyot (Eds.) *Central Asia and the Caucasus: Transnationalism and Diaspora*, London/New York, Routledge, 2009: 92.

sedentary speakers of the main branches of Common Turkic: not only the Karluk-speaking majority of Central Uzbekistan and the Fergana Valley, but also the ‘Oghuz’ and the ‘Kipchak’ Uzbeks of Khorezm.

This merger of the two aforementioned categories led to a controversy over how to standardise the new Turkic vernacular, the two written languages of the region having been, up to then, New Persian and Chagatai Turkic. The vernacularizing ideological imperatives of the Soviet state and the preference of ‘Uzbek’ as the broad ethnonym initially favoured the codification of the ‘pure’ register of the more tribal and less urban ‘Eteo-Uzbeks.’ This new literary standard was devoid of larger Persian influence and conspicuously preserved quintessentially-Turkic features such as vowel harmony, which had already disappeared in the speech of the Turkic-speaking ‘Sarts’ of the Fergana, the Tashkent oasis and the Zarafshan valley.<sup>259</sup> Only a few years later, under the influence of mid-1920s ideological shift towards relying more on a region’s urban ‘socialist vanguard’ culture, Standard Uzbek was reconceptualized in favour of the aforementioned heavily-Persianized ‘neo-Chagatai’ urban dialects and vowel harmony was ‘struck out’ of the written standard.<sup>260</sup> As a result, contemporary literary Uzbek is arguably the most-heavily-Persianized Turkic language in contemporary use, surpassing even the likes of standard Azerbaijani.

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<sup>259</sup> Vowel harmony is still present—aside from the ‘Oghuz’ and ‘Kipchak’ Uzbeks of Khorezm—also in the speech of the Uzbeks of Southern Kazakhstan, namely the cities of Turkistan/Turkestan and Chimkent/Shymkent, in addition to the southern Uzbekistan regions of Qashqadaryo/Surxondaryo. See Benningsen, Alexandre; Wimbush, S. Enders. *Muslims of the Soviet Empire: A Guide*. London, C. Hurst and Company, 1985. 59.

<sup>260</sup> Asamura, Takao. “Longing for Legacy: Vowel Harmony in the Uzbek Standard Language, 1924-1934”, *Russian and East European Studies*, (36) 2007: 48-60.  
Edgar, Adrienne Lynn. *Tribal Nation: The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan*. Princeton University Press, 2004: 163.

The ‘Uzbek’ self-identification in the 1920s Soviet census was also adopted by the majority of vernacular-Persian speakers of Bukhara, Samarqand and Surkhandarya, a legacy to which one can attribute—three or more generations down the road—the strongly underreported nature of independent Uzbekistan’s Tajiki-Persian-speaking minority.<sup>261</sup> The principal two Persophone cities in Uzbekistan diverge conspicuously in this respect. Samarqand is seen as a hotbed of Tajik ethnolinguistic nationalism, while similar forms of activism are largely unheard of in Bukhara, in spite of—or perhaps precisely due to—the latter city having a more secure Persian-speaking majority. Another conspicuous divergence, one that perhaps has more relevance to contemporary Uzbekistan–Iran relations, is the historical presence of the *Eroniy* Twelver Shia community. The bulk of Eronis descends from abductees—targets of tribal Turkmen slaver raids—who originally hailed mostly from Iranian Khorasan, including the Merv oasis. While the historical role of the Eronis had been crucial in the economy and administration of the Emirate of Bukhara,<sup>262</sup> their numbers are dwarfed by the demographic weight of the ‘indigenous’ Tajiki-Persian-speaking *Hanafti* Sunnis.

Literacy campaigns and the ideologically-driven vernacularizing efforts undertaken by the Soviet authorities in the 1920s, presaged by *Jadid* efforts less than a generation prior (admittedly not always unidirectional, as shown by the aforementioned departure from the tribal rural Uzbek register and a reappraisal of the urban ‘neo-Chagatai’) marked a sustained demotion of the status of literary Persian. The latter language and linguistic register had been associated with the most ‘reactionary’ clerical

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<sup>261</sup> Finke, Peter; Sancak, Meltem. “To Be an Uzbek or Not to Be a Tajik? Ethnicity and Locality in the Bukhara Oasis”. *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, 137(1) 2012: 47-70.

<sup>262</sup> Alexeev, Anton K. “Shia-Sunni Interactions in Greater Central Asia: Retrospective and Current States”. Moscow, Higher School of Economics, 2014: 9. URL: [www.hse.ru/data/2014/11/26/1101761106/75HUM2014.pdf](http://www.hse.ru/data/2014/11/26/1101761106/75HUM2014.pdf)  
See also Germanov, Valery A. “Shiite-Sunni Conflict of 1910 in the Bukhara Khanate”, Higher School of Economics, 2007

strata in the Emirate of Bukhara, as well as with effeteness and decadence. This was discursively juxtaposed with *Turkt̃*'s ostensible virility and vitality.<sup>263</sup> This would be the case in spite of functional Perso-Turkic bilingualism of the urban centres of the Emirate and in spite of—in stark contrast to the Ottoman Empire and British India—the vernacular use of New Persian in large swathes of Russian-ruled Central Asia.

To the bad fortune of the future Tajik polity, the most contiguous and most concentrated settlement of speakers of the latter vernacular would be in 'eastern Bukhara': the poorly-accessible and desperately-underdeveloped mountainous upper reaches of the Amu river tributaries.<sup>264</sup> The final step to the consolidation of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic as a fully-Turkic polity within the Soviet Union was therefore the elevation of the administrative status of the Tajik Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic—inhabited by speakers of the aforementioned vernacular Persian forms, as well as of Pamiri languages—to a full-fledged Soviet Republic in 1929. On that occasion, the Tajik SSR acquired 'core' Uzbekistani territories that had previously been outside the jurisdiction of the autonomous republic. Soviet authorities added the Persian-speaking westernmost portion of the Fergana Valley, centred on the city of Khujand, to the Tajik SSR. Both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan would thus constitute a patchwork of different historical territories with different degrees of integration with the new Imperial core and of corresponding modernization.<sup>265</sup> The Fergana Valley, then

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<sup>263</sup> Khalid, Adeeb. *Making Uzbekistan: Nation, Empire, and Revolution in the Early USSR*. Cornell University Press, 2015: 295.

In this manner, Moscow's quasi-imperial rule and the promotion of Russian and neo-Chagatai Uzbek thus partially mirrors earlier developments in the British Raj. In northern India, the well-entrenched use of Persian in state bureaucracy had been phased out, promoting English and Hindustani—most prominently its Persianized literary register of Urdu—in its stead.

<sup>264</sup> Khalid, Adeeb. *Making Uzbekistan: Nation, Empire, and Revolution in the Early USSR*. Cornell University Press, 2015: 303.

<sup>265</sup> Shirazi, Habibollah Abolhassan. "Political forces and their structures in Tajikistan". *Central Asian Survey*, 16(4) 1997: 611-613.



part of the Khanate of Kokand, was annexed and subjected to Russian modernization efforts some two generations prior to the multi-stage incorporation of the Bukharan polity further to the southwest. Uzbekistan's incongruity is further compounded by being the inheritor of the territories of the Khanate of Khiva, with the cultural and linguistic distinctiveness that had arose from Khorezm's geographical isolation.<sup>266</sup>

It is arguably precisely Uzbekistan's distinct regions that render a territorially-grounded nationbuilding a strategic imperative. First president Islam Karimov's book "Uzbekistan on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century: Tradition and Survival" ascribes key importance to all the past civilizations and cultural groups that inhabited Uzbekistan's territory in the formation of the Uzbek nation,<sup>267</sup> turning what used to be administrative Soviet-era boundaries into a reified 'historical reality'. The way history is taught in Uzbekistan's education system, the Turkic ethnolinguistic component of the majority of Uzbekistanis is deemphasized, especially in comparison to the Baku-Azerbaijani case discussed in the following sub-section. Instead, the Eastern Iranian—most importantly Sogdian, but also Chorasman and Bactrian—elements are put on a near-equal footing with the subsequent Turco-Mongolian layers.<sup>268</sup> This duality leaves little space to the New Persian-speaking polities of Transoxiana, such as the Samanids, which had already been 'adopted' by Tajikistan. Notable ethnic Persians who were born or lived within territories that would later become Uzbekistan are fully identified with the nationbuilding project, with the exception of statesmen such as Ismail Samani—whose mausoleum is located in Bukhara—from the national narrative. It is ethnically-

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<sup>266</sup> See map "Sredneaziatskie hanstva v pervoi polovine XIX. v." [Central Asian khanates in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century] *Prezidentskaya Biblioteka imeni B. N. El'tsina*. URL: [www.prilib.ru/item/451350](http://www.prilib.ru/item/451350)

<sup>267</sup> Gürbüz, Y. Emre. "In Search of New Historiographies for Ex-Soviet. Turkic States: Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan". in Schlyter, Birgit (Ed.) *Historiography and Nation-Building among Turkic Populations*, Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, 2014: 48.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, 56-57.

Persian—or, at the very least, ethnically-Iranian—scholars such as Imam al-Bukhari, al-Khwarizmi, Avicenna and Baha-ud-Din Naqshband who are integrated into Uzbekistan’s national historiography.<sup>269</sup>

At times, it is the idiosyncrasies of a leader that inform one’s decision to prioritize specific historical figures over others. It is no coincidence that independent Uzbekistan’s rehabilitation of Amir Timur coincided with Islam Karimov’s—the region’s most heavy-handed paternalistic autocrat—monopolization of power, after decades of Leninist-Marxist-analysis-driven Soviet historiography, which cast Timur in a negative light as a feudal oppressor.<sup>270</sup> Since the Amir’s descendants were banished from Central Asia by Abu’l-Khayrid Shaybanid Uzbeks—the very people from whom Uzbekistan inherited its ethnonym—this creates some paradoxes. This dissonance is quelled by the heuristic that any historical force conquering Uzbekistan’s territory after the Göktürks will be framed negatively as a usurper. This would be the case of the Khwarazmshahs pushing out the ‘indigenous’ Karakhanids, or the Shaybanids ousting the Timurids, in alignment with the territorially-based approach to nationbuilding.<sup>271</sup>

That being said, Uzbekistan’s ‘orthodox’ adherence to identifying the country’s territory throughout the ages with the modern nation still allows a handful of exceptions to the rule. At times, Uzbekistan’s national narratives conflate the broader idea of Turkestan with the modern state of Uzbekistan. Furthermore, both territories would

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<sup>269</sup> The aforementioned figures are brought up, for instance, in English-language brochures promoting Uzbekistan as a prime tourist destination.

<sup>270</sup> Gürbüz, Y. Emre. “In Search of New Historiographies for Ex-Soviet. Turkic States: Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan”. in Schlyter, Birgit (Ed.) *Historiography and Nation-Building among Turkic Populations*, Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, 2014: 59.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, 58-59.

Sengupta, Anita. “Image and Influence The Politics of Nation-Branding in Uzbekistan” in Atabaki, Touraj; Mehendale, Sanjiyot (Eds.) *Central Asia and the Caucasus: Transnationalism and Diaspora*, London/New York, Routledge, 2009: 97.

often find themselves conflated with the mythical land of Turan, with the rivalry this implies with Iran.<sup>272</sup> Such are the externalities of shared cultural references within the Persianate world: they can serve, at times, as a justification for keeping one another at an arm's length, rather than a tool to build bridges with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Interestingly, this does not carry the same implications for Tashkent's treatment of its own sizeable Tajiki Persian-speaking minority, nor to Uzbekistan's relations with Tajikistan proper. In Tashkent, the latter country is deemed an integral part of Turkestan. In more extreme incarnations of the worldview, Tajiks are outright portrayed, falsely albeit with decreasing frequency, as 'Persianised Uzbeks'.<sup>273</sup> The treatment of Uzbekistan's own Tajik minority oscillates between accommodation and perceptions of them constituting a 'fifth column' with allegiances to either Iran or Tajikistan.<sup>274</sup> For the time being, there seems to be an unwillingness in Uzbekistan to tackle the immaterial connectivity—past and present use of the New Persian language and shared Persianate legacies—shared with Iran 'head on'.

*B) Territorially-rooted nationbuilding in the Republic of Azerbaijan and the myth of a 'divided nation'*

The case of nationbuilding in the Republic of Azerbaijan reflects a less inflexible adherence to territoriality as a governing principle. The latter is complemented with a cross-border ethnolinguistic component, much to the displeasure of Tehran. It can be

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<sup>272</sup> Sengupta, Anita. "Image and Influence The Politics of Nation-Branding in Uzbekistan" in Atabaki, Touraj; Mehendale, Sanjiyot (Eds.) *Central Asia and the Caucasus: Transnationalism and Diaspora*, London/New York, Routledge, 2009: 96-98.

<sup>273</sup> Herzig, Edmund. *Iran and the Former Soviet South*. Chatham House, 1995: 28.  
Mukarramova, Zilola. "Uzbekistan-Tajikistan Relations: Past and Present". in Ismailova, Gulnoza S.; Khasanov, Ulugbek A. (Eds.) *Modern Central Asia: Resilience and Capacity Building*. Tashkent, University of World Economics and Diplomacy (UWED), Kent, GCRF COMPASS, Print Edition. 2021: 287.

<sup>274</sup> Herzig, Edmund. *Iran and the Former Soviet South*, London, Chatham House, 1995: 29.

argued that the reason behind the dilution of the territorial model inherited from the Soviet era were factors that suddenly rose to prominence upon Baku-Azerbaijani independence in 1991. Firstly, it was the quick acquisition of ‘brother nation’ status *vis-à-vis* the Turkish Republic.<sup>275</sup> Secondly, the final months of Soviet rule were marked by a more acutely-felt awareness of a presence of much larger—estimated to be as much as double the amount of the inhabitants of the Republic of Azerbaijan—numbers of Azerbaijani speakers in the Iran’s northwestern provinces. The third factor, arguably more ambivalent in its effects on nationbuilding, was countering Armenian claims over the course of Baku’s protracted territorial conflict with Yerevan.<sup>276</sup> While the legal *status quo* works in Azerbaijan’s favour—strengthening a territorially-grounded focus on Azerbaijan existing within its modern internationally-recognized borders inhabited by more-or-less the same people over millennia—the protracted territorial conflict had also pushed Azerbaijani elites to make moral and historical claims to parts of Armenian territory.

One of the earliest nationbuilding controversies arose in relation to the name of Azerbaijan itself. While both sides of the Aras River have experienced large-scale settlement by Oghuz Turkic nomads since the Middle Ages, it was traditionally only the lands to the south of the river that have been called Azerbaijan. The short-lived Azerbaijan Democratic Republic of 1918-1920 was the first prominent instance of the name being used to refer to lands previously known as Arran or Shirvan. The low-level naming dispute thus predates Soviet control of the area. An interesting feature of the controversy is the fact that Iranian officials made it clear that they would see any

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<sup>275</sup> Ismailzade, Fariz. “Turkey-Azerbaijan: The Honeymoon Is Over”. *Turkish Policy*, Winter 2005: 3.

<sup>276</sup> Gürbüz, Y. Emre. “In Search of New Historiographies for Ex-Soviet Turkic States: Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan”. in Schlyter, Birgit (Ed.) *Historiography and Nation-Building among Turkic Populations*, Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, 2014: 66.

official renaming of the Republic of Azerbaijan to ‘Northern Azerbaijan’—a proposal in Baku aiming to highlight the continued ‘occupied nature’ of ‘Southern Azerbaijan’—an irredentist provocation.<sup>277</sup>

Following the Bolshevik annexation of Transcaucasia, the Soviet authorities were bent on turning Azerbaijan into a showcase of Soviet modernity brought to an Iran-adjacent, Turkic Muslim context. The aim was to have this model appeal a left-wing audience both in Iran and in the newly established Republic of Turkey. Furthermore, early Soviet-Azerbaijani experiments with cultural autonomy for the Kurds of Kelbajar and the Lachin corridor sought to appeal to the Kurds of the wider region.<sup>278</sup> This would be mirrored by the roughly concomitant elevation of Tajikistan from an autonomous republic within Uzbekistan to a full-fledged Soviet republic; one of the effects of which, as some speculate, would have been Moscow having a Persian-speaking Soviet republic as a tool for the former’s ideological power projection *vis-à-vis* the millions of literate Muslims throughout British India who were familiar with Persian.<sup>279</sup>

Clear parallels between nationbuilding efforts in Azerbaijan and Central Asia—the one large difference being Baku’s brief prior experience with modern statehood—should not obfuscate how unusual Azerbaijan’s case is within its own South Caucasian regional context. Due to the particular history of the traditionally-Christian nations of Georgia and Armenia, the ethnolinguistic and denominational component of perceived nationhood always tended to override the territorial one. The process of nationbuilding

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<sup>277</sup> Cornell, Svante. *Azerbaijan since Independence*. London/New York, Routledge, 2010: chapter 12. In this respect it is a curious ‘funhouse mirror inversion’ of the Macedonia naming dispute, which was resolved in 2019 by renaming ‘the Republic of Macedonia’ ‘the Republic of North Macedonia’.

<sup>278</sup> Yilmaz, Harun. “The Rise of Red Kurdistan”. *Iranian Studies*, 47(5) 2014: 800.

<sup>279</sup> Interview with Tajikistani scholar, Dushanbe, April 2016.

in these two polities predates that of Azerbaijan by a large margin.<sup>280</sup> Azerbaijan's nationbuilding process is therefore more akin to that of its Turkic Muslim 'kin' in Central Asia. The main qualifier that made the local 'Turks' distinct was little else besides their geographic location, as exemplified by the pan-Turkist first president of the 'First Republic' Mahammad Amin Rasulzade and his treatise 'The Caucasian Turks', written in Turkish exile.<sup>281</sup> The initial challenge for Soviet Azerbaijan throughout the 1920s and 1930s was facilitating a coalescing of a distinct titular *natsional'nost*, hitherto identified as 'Tatars', 'Turks' or just 'Muslims', a goal achieved in no small part with the assistance of Soviet historians.<sup>282</sup>

It is telling that first president-elect Abulfaz Elchibey was an orientalist historian whose Soviet-era monograph mapped the 'Indo-European oppression of the Azerbaijanis throughout the ages'<sup>283</sup> while next president Heydar Aliyev was a graduate of the Department of History at Baku State University. History and historiography serve as key tools in legitimising Azerbaijan's nationhood narratives to higher degrees than in the remaining post-Soviet republics. This is explored more in depth in the following chapter. The current form of teaching and interpreting history is an amalgamation of Soviet-era and post-independence national historiography. In the immediate post-independence period, greater emphasis would be put on the notion of the Republic of Azerbaijan being a mere 'rump state', with political unity with 'Southern Azerbaijan' being the long-term end-goal. The positive contribution of foreign powers, such as the

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<sup>280</sup> Yilmaz, Harun. "A Family Quarrel: Azerbaijani Historians against Soviet Iranologists", *Iranian Studies*, 48(5) 2015: 779.

<sup>281</sup> Rasulzade, Mammad Amin, *Kafkasya Türkleri* [The Turks of the Caucasus], Istanbul: Türk Dünyası Araştırmaları Vakfı, 1928.

<sup>282</sup> See Yilmaz, Harun. "The Soviet Union and the Construction of Azerbaijani National Identity in the 1930s". *Iranian Studies*, 46(4) 2013: 511-533,

<sup>283</sup> Gasimov, Zaur. "History-Writing and History-Making in Azerbaijan Some Reflections on the Past Two Decades of Independence" in Atabaki, Touraj; Mehendale, Sanjiyot (Eds.) *Central Asia and the Caucasus: Transnationalism and Diaspora*, London/New York, Routledge, 2009: 73.

Sasanians, is conceded only insofar having had subsumed both sides of the Aras River under their political authority, thus politically uniting Azerbaijanis' ancestors for the first time.<sup>284</sup> The aforementioned Persians—much like the Arabs who arrived later and brought their religion with them—have been useful insofar as their 'invasion' helped consolidate national 'resistance against this foreign threat'. Residual Soviet historiography is palpable in case of the 'proto-Socialist' '*ajam* anti-Abbasid rebel Bābak Ḥorramdīn becoming an 'Azerbaijani national hero'.<sup>285</sup>

A key feature of territorially-grounded nationbuilding is arguing—whenever linguistic and cultural continuity would be a 'hard sell'—for demographic continuity within a given territory over the course of millennia. The Christianized Northeastern-Caucasian-language-speaking kingdom of Albania is considered an early iteration of Azerbaijani statehood, in spite of their 'direct linguistic and denominational descendants' being still around in the Republic of Azerbaijan, known by the ethnonym Udi. Possibly as a way to mitigate this discrepancy, conflation and intentional ambiguity are introduced to the curricula: In some of the latter's iterations, Caucasian Albanians—but also other ancient peoples such as the Cimmerians—are all 'Turks' here. The fact that 'Northern' and 'Southern' Azerbaijan tended to be two ethnolinguistically-distinct territories prior to Turkification, something occasionally admitted by the odd Baku-Azerbaijani scholar,<sup>286</sup> is generally also glossed over. Instead, the *topos* of a 'divided nation' and the overall demonization of any 'division' only really start gaining relevance when the school history curriculum moves on to the

<sup>284</sup> Gürbüz, Y. Emre. "In Search of New Historiographies for Ex-Soviet. Turkic States: Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan". in Schlyter, Birgit (Ed.) *Historiography and Nation-Building among Turkic Populations*, Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, 2014: 48, 52.

<sup>285</sup> Gürbüz, Emre. "From Soviet Historiography to National Historiography: Continuities and Discontinuities in Azerbaijani Historiography". in Sengupta, Anita et al. (Eds.) *Eurasia Twenty Years After*, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies, Kolkata, June 2012: 98, 102.

<sup>286</sup> Kouhi-Esfahani, Marzieh. *Iran's Foreign Policy in the South Caucasus*. Routledge. 2019: 144.

Middle Ages. Here, infighting between Oghuz Turks—and soon also religious division taking root between them—is framed as a tragedy. Wars between the Ottomans and the Qara Qoyunlu, or between the Ottomans and the Safavids, are glossed over, since they are not deemed true ‘foreign invasions’. It is only the conversion of Shah Ismail I’s realms to Shiism and the 1514 defeat of the Safavids by the Ottomans on the Chaldiran plain which are discursively framed as a tragedy, as Turkic Muslim ‘brothers’ are ‘pitted against each other’. In this discursive framing, the capacity of European powers to carve up the Ottoman Empire and the Caucasus was only possible by taking advantage of this division. Modern secular nationalism and pan-Turkism are portrayed here as a panacea, or at least a force capable of bridging this ‘artificial’ division.<sup>287</sup> Such a framing would match the worldview of the secular-minded segment of Azerbaijan’s population, but could alienate the devout Muslim minority, which may find Iran a more worthwhile model of emulation than Turkey, mainly due to the shared Twelver Shia faith.<sup>288</sup>

In spite of the adoption of Shiism by Iran being framed largely in a negative light in Azerbaijani official historiography, Shah Ismail I himself is a positive historical figure in contemporary Azerbaijan. Besides being the founder of the largest ‘Azerbaijani-Turk’-led empire in history, he is also praised as an author of rich early-Azerbaijani-language poetry, written under the pen-name of *Ḥaṭā’ī* (‘the mistaken one’). It is chiefly under the latter *nom de plume* that Shah Ismail is commemorated in

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<sup>287</sup> Gürbüz, Emre. “From Soviet Historiography to National Historiography: Continuities and Discontinuities in Azerbaijani Historiography”. in Sengupta, Anita et al. (Eds.) *Eurasia Twenty Years After*, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies, Kolkata, June 2012: 96-98, 101-103.

<sup>288</sup> Hunter, Shireen. “Azerbaijan: Search for Identity and New Partners”. in Bremmer, Ian; Taras, Ray (Eds.) *Nation and Politics in the Soviet Successor States*. Cambridge University Press, 1993: 237.



the Republic of Azerbaijan.<sup>289</sup> Alongside competing historical claims to the legacy of Safavids between Iran and Azerbaijan, it is also the twelfth century Persian poet Nizami Ganjavi<sup>290</sup> that the modern-day nation-states of Iran and Azerbaijan lay equal claim to, albeit on different grounds in each case. While one can dismiss any such ahistorical debates as petty, they are a non-negligible factor in contemporary Iran–Azerbaijan relations. As Touraj Atabaki asserts in reference to the region: “[w]hat is generally referred to as nation-state building, has often entailed components other than ethnic or linguistic attachments. Collective imagination, political allegiances, reconstructing and reinterpreting history, the invention of necessary historical traditions to justify and give coherence to the emerging modern state, often became major factors in bringing groups of people together and strengthening or even forming their common sense of identity and political solidarity.”<sup>291</sup>

Needless to say, the intensity of Azerbaijan’s historical and self-determination-based claims to northwestern Iran has waxed and waned over the course of the past three decades. This did not however impede the construction of flawed historical analogies. The Treaties of Gulistan and Turkmenchay are framed in Baku-Azerbaijani nationbuilding discourse as a ‘malevolent partition’ of Azerbaijan between a ‘Russian-

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<sup>289</sup> Gasimov, Zaur. “History-Writing and History-Making in Azerbaijan Some Reflections on the Past Two Decades of Independence” in Atabaki, Touraj; Mehendale, Sanjiyot (Eds.) *Central Asia and the Caucasus: Transnationalism and Diaspora*, London/New York, Routledge, 2009: 74.

See Gürbüz, Y. Emre. “In Search of New Historiographies for Ex-Soviet. Turkic States: Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan”. in Schlyter, Birgit (Ed.) *Historiography and Nation-Building among Turkic Populations*, Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, 2014.

<sup>290</sup> Storey, Charles Ambrose; de Blois, François. *Persian Literature - A Biobibliographical Survey: Volume V Poetry of the Pre-Mongol Period*. Routledge; Curzon; 2nd revised edition, 2004: 363.

‘Persian’ here refers most importantly to the language used by the poet in his oeuvre. Defining historical figures of the pre-modern era in terms of ethnicity has always been fraught, if not outright anachronistic, as it would typically not be a relevant facet of one’s identity.

<sup>291</sup> Atabaki, Touraj. “Recasting and Recording Identities in the Caucasus”. *Iran and the Caucasus*, 6(1/2) 2002: 219.

held North’ and a ‘Persian-held South’.<sup>292</sup> The December-January 1989-1990 incident of a crowd of Soviet Azerbaijanis tearing down border post barriers on the Irano-Soviet border to visit their kin on the other side of the Aras had been framed as ‘the tearing down of *our* Berlin Wall’.<sup>293</sup> This and the popularity of Ardabil-born Soviet singer Rubaba Muradova’s song ‘Ayrılıq’ (Separation) reflects the *naïveté* of the final years of the Soviet Union and the first year of independence.<sup>294</sup> Subsequent decades of relations with Iran would be marked by a weakening of romanticized ethnonationalism, giving way to pragmatism.

As has been pointed out, the balance between territoriality and a greater ethnolinguistic push in Azerbaijani nationbuilding has not always been well maintained. Elchibey’s presidency was marked by a very assertive ethnonationalist push, but this was quickly dampened by a series of military defeats of Azerbaijan at the hands of Armenian forces and finally by said leader’s ousting in the summer of 1993. Ever since, the guiding principle of Azerbaijani statebuilding has been an effort to legitimize Azerbaijan’s efforts to regain sovereignty within the totality of its present, internationally recognised, borders. This explains the relative marginalization of ‘Southern Azerbaijan’ discourse in the Aliyev era and a return to *Realpolitik*. Academia and the education system more broadly remains a holdout of revisionist territorial narratives. In spite of—or maybe exactly because of—the fact that the Republic of

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<sup>292</sup> This appears to be in implicit analogy to late-18<sup>th</sup>-century Poland, or 20<sup>th</sup>-century Korea and Germany.

<sup>293</sup> Hunter, Shireen. “Azerbaijan: Search for Identity and New Partners”. in Bremmer, Ian; Taras, Ray (Eds.) *Nation and Politics in the Soviet Successor States*. Cambridge University Press, 1993: 228-229.

<sup>294</sup> Gasimov, Zaur. “History-Writing and History-Making in Azerbaijan Some Reflections on the Past Two Decades of Independence” in Atabaki, Touraj; Mehendale, Sanjiyot (Eds.) *Central Asia and the Caucasus: Transnationalism and Diaspora*, London/New York, Routledge, 2009: 80.

It would be dishonest to frame the *topos* of partition as entirely home-grown, as already some decades prior it had been employed by Moscow to show how benevolent Soviet rule over Azerbaijan had been, in comparison to the oppression of their ethnic kin by the ethnocentric policies of Pahlavi Iran.

See Hunter, Shireen. “Azerbaijan: Search for Identity and New Partners”. in Bremmer, Ian; Taras, Ray (Eds.) *Nation and Politics in the Soviet Successor States*. Cambridge University Press, 1993: 230.

Azerbaijan remained for a long time, unable to enforce its own territorial integrity, ever-increasing historical claims abounded. The state-approved ‘historical’ maps of Azerbaijan keep on including Iran’s northwestern provinces of West Azerbaijan, East Azerbaijan, Ardabil and Zanzan,<sup>295</sup> ever increasingly they also include the near-entirety of modern-day Armenia. There has been a clear recent shift in emphasis away from ‘Southern Azerbaijan’ to historical claims to Armenia’s Yerevan and Syunik (*Zangezur* in Azerbaijani Turkish) regions. An example is the launching of an exhibition on the Erivan Khanate in the autumn of 2019 in the flashy Heydar Aliyev Centre in Baku, emphasising the past Turkic-Muslim dimension of political rule and material culture over the territory of modern-day Armenia.<sup>296</sup> The advantage of such undertakings has been steering clear of further antagonising Tehran, all while making convenient use of a situation at the time when Baku’s relations with Yerevan could not have conceivably been any more strained.

*C) Partially-deterritorialized historical narratives of nationhood in the remainder of Central Eurasia*

i) Tajikistan

Unlike Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan, Tajikistan gives—alongside Turkmenistan—much more prominence to the ethnolinguistic component of nationbuilding, with a proportionally de-emphasized territorial component. The structural barrier to giving greater weight to contemporary territorial boundaries has been the fact that Samarqand and Bukhara—the twin cradles of Tajiki Persian language and culture—found

<sup>295</sup> Gürbüz, Y. Emre. “In Search of New Historiographies for Ex-Soviet Turkic States: Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan”. in Schlyter, Birgit (Ed.) *Historiography and Nation-Building among Turkic Populations*, Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, 2014: 66.

<sup>296</sup> Clayton, Austin. “Azerbaijan mounts exhibition showcasing Erivan Khanate”. *EurasiaNet*, October 17<sup>th</sup> 2019. URL: [eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-mounts-exhibition-showcasing-erivan-khanate](https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-mounts-exhibition-showcasing-erivan-khanate)

themselves on the ‘wrong’ side of the administrative boundary in the aftermath of the *razmeževanie* process of the 1920s. The consolidation of a Tajik identity was largely a process of defining oneself in opposition to the Turkic-speaking majority inhabiting ‘Russian Turkestan’.<sup>297</sup> This explains why speakers of Eastern Iranian languages such as the Yaghnobis of Central Tajikistan and the Ismaili Muslim speakers of various Pamiri languages of the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region of Tajikistan are seen as integral components of the Tajik nation. The overwhelmingly Sunni denominational affiliation and Turkestani regional affiliation<sup>298</sup> also sets Central Asian Persian speakers apart from the Twelver Shia Persians inhabiting the Iranian Plateau.<sup>299</sup>

By contrast, the boundary between Tajiki-Persian speakers of Tajikistan and Dari-Persian speakers of Northern Afghanistan is much blurrier. In fact, the use of the name ‘Tajik’ in its modern-day understanding may have originated in the border-straddling Badakhshan region, or in Afghanistan’s Panjshir Valley, as an exonym used by the local Uzbek feudal overlords to describe local speakers of Persian and Eastern Iranian vernaculars. It had also been used with the same meaning in the Emirate of Bukhara. The etymology of ‘Tajik’ is unclear, but it might have originally meant ‘Arab’ in the Persian language, an adaptation and synecdoche of the name of the *Banū Tayy* Arab Tribe of Upper Mesopotamia. With the bulk of the Arab-led Muslim armies invading Khorasan and Transoxiana likely consisting of Persian *koine* speakers from Western and Central Iran, the term underwent a semantic shift and started carrying the

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<sup>297</sup> See Khalid, Adeeb. *Making Uzbekistan: Nation, Empire, and Revolution in the Early USSR*. Cornell University Press, 2015: Chapter 7 - Tajik as a Residual Category: 291-315.

<sup>298</sup> It should be noted that a Turkestani Muslim identity was present in what would become Tajikistan. Young Turk Enver Pasha, the main engineer of the Armenian Genocide, died fighting the Bolsheviks in what-is-now Central Tajikistan on the side of the Basmachi rebels out of Muslim and quasi-pan-Turkist solidarity in 1922.

<sup>299</sup> See Bečka, Jiří. “Tajik Literature from the 16th Century to the Present”. in Rypka, Jan (Ed.) *History of Iranian Literature*. 1968: 483-606.

meaning of ‘Persian’. Finally, with the Persianization of the local speakers of Sogdian, Bactrian and Chorasmian, it was appropriated by the newly-arriving Turks and exported further afield with subsequent waves Turco-Mongol conquest to places such as far as India.<sup>300</sup> In its use it thus parallels the historical use of the exonym ‘Tat’—of unknown etymology, but likely unrelated to ‘Tajik’—by the Oghuz Turks who settled throughout the South Caucasus and in northwestern Iran.

The ethnogenesis of Tajiks was very much a top-down undertaking promoted by Moscow. A key figure in this respect was Sadriiddin Ayni, who undertook efforts to identify a distinct Tajiki literary tradition that would set Central Asia’s Persian speakers apart from those of the Iranian Plateau. Ayni was born in the Bukhara oasis and was thus in a privileged position to access the centres of Central Asia’s Persian-language culture. He developed an antipathy towards the *Jadid* movement, but saw value in their search for a standardized vernacular that would be intelligible to the masses. Instead of relying on neo-Chagatai like the majority of his peers, Ayni sought to codify a literary standard for the Persian vernacular varieties of the Zarafshan and Fergana Valleys. Together with Jan Rypka, a Czechoslovak contemporary of his, he concluded that it was the mass conversion of the Safavid realms to Twelver Shia Islam in the sixteenth century that engendered a divergence of literary traditions. In that respect, Iran proper, rather than the Persian speakers of South and Central Asia, is discursively framed as ‘the odd one out’. Following this logic, poets such as Omar Khayyam, Nizami, Sa‘di were representatives of a ‘yet unadulterated’ literary tradition, common to both Iranians and Tajiks. Appeals to ‘Tajik-ness’ in the 1910s and 1920s, a context where religious affiliation and a *mahalla*, city or region were main identifiers of one’s collective

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<sup>300</sup> Perry, John. “Tajik I. The Ethnonym: Origins and Application”. *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. July 20, 2009. URL: [iranicaonline.org/articles/tajik-i-the-ethnonym-origins-and-application](http://iranicaonline.org/articles/tajik-i-the-ethnonym-origins-and-application)

identity, largely fell on deaf ears in Samarqand and Bukhara. In stark contrast to this, early Tajik ethnonationalist agitation was more successful in the Fergana Valley—another traditionally-bilingual ‘core’ region of early-Soviet Uzbekistan—and about a fifth of the latter was eventually merged with Soviet Uzbekistan’s Tajik Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic to form together a new full-fledged Soviet Republic.<sup>301</sup>

Since independence, Tajikistan’s nationbuilding has largely been a continuation of the Soviet intellectual trends. Partially out of efforts to assert distinctiveness from Iran’s Persian speakers, emphasis has been put on continuity with Tajikistan’s Eastern Iranian past. Sogdians and Bactrians are thus the precursors to the Tajik nation.<sup>302</sup> In analogy to Uzbekistan’s reappraisal of Amir Timur and the Samarqand-based Timurids, Tajikistan’s post-civil war leadership opted to adopt Ismail Samani—and the Bukhara-based Samanids more broadly—as vanguards of Tajik statehood and nationhood.<sup>303</sup> Tajikistan’s nationbuilding process is still in a comparatively-early stage, due to the disruption of civil war that took up much of the 1990s, a conflict which was itself a manifestation of still-unresolved boiling tensions between multiple regional *nomenklatura* cliques. Throughout the Soviet period, it was the Leninabadis (i.e. Khujandis) who held most economic and political power, while the Badakhshanis were

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<sup>301</sup> Bečka, Jiří. “Tajik Literature from the 16th Century to the Present”. in Rypka, Jan (Ed.) *History of Iranian Literature*. 1968: 483-606.

Khalid, Adeeb. *Making Uzbekistan: Nation, Empire, and Revolution in the Early USSR*. Cornell University Press, 2015: Chapter 7 - Tajik as a Residual Category: 305-311.

Hulstine, Matthew. “Where Persian Ends and Tajik Begins: Sadriiddin Ayni and Language Reform in Early Soviet Tajikistan”, Masters’ Thesis for Indiana University, September 2019: 8, 24, 30, 42.

<sup>302</sup> Atkin, Muriel. “Tajik National Identity”. *Iranian Studies*, 26(1/2) 1993: 151-158.

<sup>303</sup> Maytdinova, Guzel. “25 Years of Tajik Sovereignty: History and Prospects for Development”. in Laruelle, Marlene; Kourmanova, Aitolkyn (Eds.) *Central Asia at 25: Looking back, moving forward*. Central Asia Program Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University, May 2017: 16.

in control of much of national cultural production and education.<sup>304</sup> Ever since the peace agreement of 1997, an ever narrowed clique of Kulabi strongmen—the vast majority from a single district of Danghara—hold most of the power in the country.<sup>305</sup> It is this lack of accountability that allows for recurring *faux pas*, such as President Rahmon’s entourage peddling, from the mid-2010s onwards, pseudo-scientific theories of Tajik racial superiority over Tajikistan’s neighbours, due to the former ostensibly being ‘pure Aryans’.<sup>306</sup>

## ii) Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan represents a case of a post-Soviet national identity that has very little to do with actual territory and everything to do with ethnolinguistic and tribal affiliation.<sup>307</sup> The very task to standardise the Turkmen language in the 1920s was a major challenge, as Soviet linguists had to resist the temptation of wholesale-importing-from-Azerbaijani already-coined vocabulary for new concepts pertaining to modernity, as well as to find a compromise variety between the two largest, politically-dominant tribes: the Teke and the Yomut.<sup>308</sup> Both the literary standard and the vernacular varieties have an abundance of Persian loanwords, in their sheer quantity arguably third to the ‘neo-Chagatai’ Uzbek (and the closely-related literary Uyghur), and Azerbaijani Turkish. Other than that, the

<sup>304</sup> Alexeev, Anton K. “Shia-Sunni Interactions in Greater Central Asia: Retrospective and Current States”. Moscow, Higher School of Economics, 2014, 1-16. URL: [www.hse.ru/data/2014/11/26/1101761106/75HUM2014.pdf](http://www.hse.ru/data/2014/11/26/1101761106/75HUM2014.pdf)

<sup>305</sup> See Tomek, Jan. “The Dynamics of the Peace Process in Tajikistan: Power-Sharing and the Unravelling of the post-Civil War Status Quo”. Analytical Paper for *Noria Research*. Jan 2018. URL: <https://noria-research.com/peace-process-tajikistan/>

<sup>306</sup> “Činovnik: Dlya vsteči s Džanobi Oli neobhodimo imet’ ariškuyu vnešnost” [High-level official: One needs to look Aryan in order to meet the *Janāb-i ‘Ālī*]. *Asia-Plus*, 29 April 2016. URL: [asiaplus.tj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/politics/20160429/225129](http://asiaplus.tj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/politics/20160429/225129)

<sup>307</sup> Peyrouse, Sebastien. *Turkménistan – Un destin au carrefour des empires* [Turkmenistan: A Destiny at the Crossroads of Empires]. Belin Éditeur, Paris. 2007; as cited in Tayshanova, Saltanat T.; Aitbayeva, Rauilya T.; Abzhapparova, Bibikhadisha Zh.; Aliyeva, Alpeissov, A.K. “French Historiography of Central Asia”, *Utopia y Praxis Latinoamericana*, 2018.

<sup>308</sup> Edgar, Adrienne Lynn. *Tribal Nation: The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan*. Princeton University Press, 2004: 137-138, 149.

influence of Persianate elite culture on the Turkmen had been rather limited. Because of Turkmen having historically inhabited the peripheries of larger historical polities—be it Safavid or Qajar Iran, or the Russian or Soviet empires—there has been an imperative to maintain working relations with the aforementioned polities, but preferably ‘at an arm’s length’. In turn, the Turkmen tribes themselves were more often a source of anxiety for rulers in the wider region and the perceptions in their own nationbuilding narratives can still be informed by that. A minor trauma in Iranian historical memory was the defeat of Qajar Persian troops at the hands of the Teke tribesmen in 1861—who had already overrun the Iranian-controlled Merv and Sarakhs oases a hundred years prior—marking a decline of Iran’s influence in the northeast. Unlike the military defeats in the northwest incurred by Iran at the hands of Russia and immortalised by the ‘humiliating’ Gulistan and Turkmenchay treaties, Russian advancement into Transcaspia and the resulting ‘pacification’ of the Turkmen nomads in the northeast was a development welcomed by Tehran.<sup>309</sup>

An example of how territory is a rather inconsequential factor in Turkmenistan’s nationbuilding and historiography is the fact of the country’s national poet—the 18th century figure Magtymguly Pyragy (*Maḥdūmqolī-ye Farāḡī*)—having been born and died in the Turkmensahra region of Iran (corresponding to northern parts of the modern-day Golestan Province) being deemed of little importance in Turkmenistan.<sup>310</sup> With both the benefits and drawbacks of a geopolitical position on the ‘perpetual periphery’,

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<sup>309</sup> Khazeni, Arash. “The Turkmen in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Persian Chronicles”. *Central Eurasian Studies Review: Publication of the Central Eurasian Studies Society*, Fall 2007: 9.

<sup>310</sup> Peyrouse, Sebastien. *Turkménistan – Un destin au carrefour des empires* [Turkmenistan: A Destiny at the Crossroads of Empires]. Belin Éditeur, Paris. 2007; cited in Tayshanova, Saltanat T.; Aitbayeva, Rauilya T.; Abzhapparova, Bibikhadisha Zh.; Aliyeva, Alpeissov, A.K. “French Historiography of Central Asia”, *Utopia y Praxis Latinoamericana*, 2018.



Turkmen nationbuilding is subject to the imperative of maintaining working relations with all of its neighbours, as well as regional powers further afield.<sup>311</sup>

While the socially-constructed nature of Caspian-Central Asian nations and the key importance of historical narratives has been highlighted, it should not lead the reader to a false conclusion that the ongoing nationbuilding projects in said countries are somehow inherently more artificial than those of a more-established nation-states such as Iran, the Christian-majority nations of the South Caucasus, or of Western European nations for that matter. The main distinguishing factor is that most post-Soviet republics having had started their nationbuilding processes only relatively recently as a Moscow-driven top-down affair. In many cases it is still-ongoing, following post-independence course-corrections, thereby revealing how the production of national history and historiography is a dynamic process that accommodates the political needs of a given domestic and regional context. In Soviet times this served to justify the political dominance of a particular ‘titular ethnic group’. In the post-independence period, however, mere administrative boundaries became reified, essentialized and reframed as centuries-in-the-making historical realities. Lastly, it needs to be highlighted how some of the national narratives are meant for different audiences. While most nationbuilding historical narratives are clearly targeting a domestic ‘national constituency’, some elements of said narratives are meant to assert ‘ownership’ of historical figures, polities or present-day territories *vis-à-vis* a once culturally politically or militarily dominant neighbour. For the case of Iran’s relations with the ‘former Soviet South’, these narratives at times reveal how Iran—both as a

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<sup>311</sup> Peyrouse, Sebastien. *Turkmenistan: Strategies of Power, Dilemmas of Development*. Routledge, Abingdon, New York, 2015; cited in Tayshanova, Saltanat T.; Aitbayeva, Rauilya T.; Abzhapparova, Bibikhadisha Zh.; Aliyeva, Alpeissov, A.K. “French Historiography of Central Asia”, *Utopia y Praxis Latinoamericana*, 2018.

historical and a present-day polity—is perceived, but also how political and economic imperatives of a given moment feed back into said narratives for the sake of expediency.

## **Conclusion**

Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan maintain the strongest immaterial links with the Islamic Republic of Iran in ways that have informed their bilateral and multilateral relations over the course of the three-or-so decades of independence. This fact is explored in the following two chapters for two out of these three republics in ways that now get to leverage the aforementioned constructivist framework and the methodological inventory of discourse analysis to the fullest extent. Unlike the general situation in the South Caucasus, in Central Asia this immaterial connectivity rarely correlates with greater material connectivity. This is due to transport links and trade being most relevant *vis-à-vis* Iran's overland and maritime neighbours of Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan respectively, both of whom were, historically-speaking, nomadic peoples comparatively little-influenced by Persianate urban culture. Alongside Christian-majority Armenia and Georgia—both countries mostly being relevant as the occasional counter-messaging tool in Tehran's discursive repertoire to delegitimize the 'Clash of Civilizations' metanarrative, as well as Armenia's relevance stemming from the latter representing one angle of the 'Tehran–Baku–Yerevan regional drama triangle', mirrored by the now-defunct Tehran–Tashkent–Dushanbe one—their relations with Iran generally run on pragmatic economic interests and on *Realpolitik*. Unlike the situation with the Republic of Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, national identity

and an intersubjective understanding of the regional state of affairs play a marginal role in the remainder of the Iran–Central Eurasia regional nexus.<sup>312</sup>

Initial deficiencies in terms of material connectivity have been the biggest factor behind near-non-existent trade between Iran and Central Asia in the early years of independence. International sanctions targeting Iran, non-complementary national economies and ongoing nationbuilding- and sovereignty-issues nonetheless linger on as causal factors behind ‘unnaturally-low’ levels of bilateral trade and behind Iran’s relatively-weak regional influence respectively. The role of ECO had already been eclipsed by the role of the SCO in Iran–Central Eurasia relations. This is not to say the former organization’s institutional framework cannot be leveraged and ECO itself resuscitated in the future, should more favourable geopolitical conditions arise. China- and India-driven material connectivity networks have nevertheless been the main recent regional ‘game-changer’. Their importance still mostly lies in the sheer potential boost for material connectivity and in the associated possibility for the commodity-export-dependent economies of the region to diversify. The economic impact is difficult to precisely qualify, but the economic dividends are likely to be substantial for the entire broader region. While this east–west and north–south connectivity have generally been a positive-sum game marked by high degrees of complementarity, Iran-circumventing BRI transport corridors—such as the trans-Caspian ‘Middle Corridor’—nevertheless introduce some zero-sum elements to regional material connectivity.

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<sup>312</sup> A notable exception in the realm of identity and self-conceptualization is the alignment between Tehran and Yerevan in terms of harbouring a negative historical memory of past domination by Turco-Mongol overlords. This in part also informs their joint staunch opposition to seeing a rise of regional hegemony that could result from closer strategic coordination between the Turkic states of the region.

### Chapter 3—Republic of Azerbaijan Case Study: Elite Discourse on Iran–

#### Azerbaijan Relations

When referring to ‘Azerbaijan’, it is often necessary to disambiguate, unless the writer or speaker’s intention is made absolutely clear from the context. From the late-Achaemenid period, the territory roughly coinciding with the Iran’s modern-day provinces of West Azerbaijan, East Azerbaijan and Ardabil had been associated with the personal name of the satrap *Āturpātah* (Old and Middle Iranian for ‘protector of the fire’), as subsequently used in the Seleucid place name (*Media*) *Āturpātakāna*, from which the later term *Āzərbāyjān* descends. Even though my historian interlocutors in Baku insist that, already in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the term starts being used as a blanket term for the semi-independent khanates north of the Aras River,<sup>313</sup> this does not appear to be fully attested—or in wider use—prior to the early-20<sup>th</sup> century. It is the short-lived first Azerbaijan Democratic Republic—founded by Mammad Amin Rasulzade that officially adopts the toponym for the first time, much to the displeasure of the Iranian leadership.<sup>314</sup> Rasulzade himself is quoted as having regretted this decision on strategic grounds later in life.<sup>315</sup> Over the course of subsequent decades, the term generally lost its capacity to offend Iranian sensibilities. By contrast, any use of the term ‘Southern Azerbaijan’ (*Cənubi Azərbaycan*) in reference to Iranian Azerbaijan is perceived as a political provocation in Iran due to its ostensibly-irredentist

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<sup>313</sup> Interview with Professor Solmaz Rustamova-Tohidi and Dr Vidadi Mustafayev, Baku, 29<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>314</sup> Ahmadi, Hamid. “The Clash of Nationalisms: Iranian Response to Baku’s Irredentism”. in Kamrava, Mehran (Ed.) *The Great Game in West Asia: Iran, Turkey and the South Caucasus*. Oxford University Press, 2018: 108.

<sup>315</sup> Atabaki, Touraj. *Azerbaijan: Ethnicity and the Struggle for Power in Iran*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2000: 25.

connotations.<sup>316</sup> I thus refer to the Republic of Azerbaijan by its full name whenever ambiguity would arise otherwise. When in need of using the adjectival form, I generally resort to ‘Baku-Azerbaijani’ to avoid the unwieldy ‘pertaining to the Republic of Azerbaijan’. I also consciously avoid the ethnonym Azeri—most commonly used in Iranian domestic discourse, predominantly for Azerbaijani speakers in Iran’s northwest—to avoid conflation with the dead Northwestern Iranian Old Āzarī language and in consideration of many Azerbaijani speakers not seeing the term as neutral. I also opt for the neutral term ‘polity’, when referring to historical khanates formally under Qajar suzerainty, to would-be breakaway republics, or when addressing Soviet Socialist Republics endowed with some limited degree of autonomy within the USSR. The goal is to sidestep the fraught question whether a historical polity exhibited qualities of sovereign statehood, as it is to avoid anachronistic use of specific politico-institutional designations.

As far as my fieldwork interviews are concerned, it is useful to differentiate between my younger interlocutors in Baku—who generally all work in foreign-policy research or are international relations scholars and who insisted we conduct the interviews in English—and my interlocutors at the Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences’ Institute of Oriental Studies—for the most part Soviet-era historians by training—who were keen on talking to me in Russian and who are generally all in their sixties or seventies. As I subsequently show, my aim is to identify the discursive strategies

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<sup>316</sup> Ahmadi, Hamid. “The Clash of Nationalisms: Iranian Response to Baku’s Irredentism”. in Kamrava, Mehran (Ed.) *The Great Game in West Asia: Iran, Turkey and the South Caucasus*. Oxford University Press, 2018: 108.

Ironically enough, the agreement on renaming the former-Yugoslav republic of Macedonia ‘North Macedonia’ in international contexts was a politically-acceptable solution to Greek objections of a roughly-analogous nature. Baku-Azerbaijani lawmakers threatening to carry out the same type of name-change, thereby implying the existence of a ‘Southern Azerbaijan’, some years prior was met with much outrage in Tehran.

employed in Baku-Azerbaijani identity construction and more broadly to contextualize interviewee responses. I also point out the recurring nationally-prevalent *topoi* and discursive strategies more broadly that a person will inevitably be imbued with by virtue of being a member of the scholarly and policy-influencing elite in the Republic of Azerbaijan. My approach is, for the most part, an interpretive one. Each of the three main thematic segments approaches the topic of contemporary Iran–Azerbaijan relations—including the specific path that led to the current situation and Baku-Azerbaijani elite framing of the latter IR dyad—from a different angle. First I seek to identify the difficulty of reaching a basic historical and semantic ‘common ground’ when discussing these bilateral relations, pointing how Baku-Azerbaijani statebuilding and nationbuilding is anchored in a set of metanarratives in which Iran’s conspicuous absence is often just as telling as its presence. Secondly, I look at the intensification of networks of regional alliances and of economic interdependence, bolstered by a proliferation of physical connectivity projects. The common denominator of this section is ‘considerations rooted in material reality’. Lastly, I explore the profoundly salient ‘immaterial connectivity’ of historico-cultural, denominational and kinship ties evoked in both prior segments, insofar as they both facilitate and complicate the Iran–Republic-of-Azerbaijan regional dyad in ways that do not necessarily arise, for instance, in the Iran–Russia, Iran–China, or even the Iran–Kazakhstan relationship.

#### **I)      Difficulty in establishing shared frames of reference**

This section examines entrenched discursive strategies pertaining to Azerbaijani nationhood and statehood, as used by academic and foreign-policy-expert elites in Baku. I was taken for a foreign interlocutor who would tend to be much more closely

familiar with the historiography of the territories known nowadays as ‘Azerbaijan’ in the way they are represented in the discourse promulgated by international scholarship, rather than ‘national’ Baku-Azerbaijani scholarship—an assumption that was proven largely correct. The interviews themselves would reflect this underlying tension at times when pre-independence national history would be brought up. In terms of discursive strategies pertaining to Azerbaijan’s past and present standing within its own corner of Eurasia and pertaining to its national identity, constructive discursive macro-strategies and those of perpetuation—most prominently the constituent ‘justification strategy’—would be employed routinely.

#### *A) Divergent historiographies*

As had been discussed previously, a key feature of consolidating a national identity—itsself typically a prerequisite for statebuilding—is formalizing a nation’s imagined historical role in its own broader region of the world. A discursive strategy of assimilation takes place by means of associating attested historical polities—however tenuously—with the modern nation-state at hand. These historical polities would be represented in the discourse as ‘prior incarnations’ of a given nation’s statehood. In that respect, Azerbaijan faces somewhat different challenges than the independent Muslim-majority republics of post-Soviet Central Asia. At a time when the three modern-era polities of the South Caucasus experimented with independence after having capitalized on the power vacuum created by the Russian Civil War following the 1917 Revolution, the Muslims of Central Asia were not yet organizing their primary political identities—let alone any association with a territorially-delineated polity—around their ethnolinguistic affiliation. The latter came a few years later, with the Moscow-driven *natsional’no-territorial’noe razmeževanie* process of largely-linguistically-based

administrative delineation. Thanks to Azerbaijan's comparative 'head start', domestic knowledge-production and scholarly discussions around Azerbaijan's 'national' history and historiography have been taking place for longer than in the case of the Central Asian republics.<sup>317</sup>

Another feature that distinguishes Azerbaijan's 'nationalized' historical narrative from those promoted in a top-down fashion across Central Asia is the specific role of Iran. Southern Dagestan, eastern Georgia, the eastern part of historic Armenia, as well as all of the Azerbaijani-speaking territories north of the Aras River, all fell under the suzerainty of the Qajar shahs—widely considered to be the direct antecedent of contemporary Iranian statehood. It was not until a series of military defeats by Imperial Russia—a territorial loss formalized in the 1813 Gulistan and the 1828 Turkmenchay treaties—that said territories found themselves part of the Russian Empire and their internal developments started diverging from those within Qajar Iran. It needs to be highlighted that 'Gulistan and Turkmenchay' represent prominent *topoi* and associated national myths in the official discourse of both the Republic of Azerbaijan and Iran. They nevertheless fulfil distinct roles in either country. Because of this still-relatively-recent—in historical terms—coexistence of the Iranian plateau and of the eastern flank of the Caucasus region as territorial units of the same dynastic state—and in spite of discursive strategies of the 'downplaying' and the 'avoiding' kind employed in history-writing in Baku—Iran tends to be an unavoidable topic whenever debates among Azerbaijan's historian elite take place.

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<sup>317</sup> See Yilmaz, Harun. "The Soviet Union and the Construction of Azerbaijani National Identity in the 1930s". *Iranian Studies*, 46(4) 2013: 511-533.  
and Yilmaz, Harun. "A Family Quarrel: Azerbaijani Historians against Soviet Iranologists". *Iranian Studies*, 48(Special Issue 5: Russian Orientalism to Soviet Iranology: The Persian-speaking world and its history through Russian eyes) 2015: 769-783.



A great source of insight was an interview—one that ended up constituting a *de facto* focus group—carried out at the department of Iranian studies of the Oriental Institute of Azerbaijan’s Academy of Sciences. As one of the very few interviews in the Baku-leg of doctoral fieldwork which involved more than one interlocutor at a time,<sup>318</sup> witnessing the two contrasting historian camps and the two scholars reasserting their positions ‘in real time’ provided some insight into the bandwidth of acceptable domestic academic ‘polite disagreement’. It also allowed for the use of juxtaposition—not to be confused here with juxtaposition as a discursive strategy employed by producers of discourse—as a method of analysing official and semi-official discourse. There is undeniable dynamism and some plurality of opinion within the ongoing nationbuilding process in the Republic of Azerbaijan. It is possible to identify two Baku-Azerbaijani historian camps, each asserting a different dating of the earliest instance of ‘genuine Azerbaijani statehood’. The main fault line is between those who identify the Safavid Empire as an early incarnation of Azerbaijani statehood versus those who deem Safavid Iran an instance of quintessentially ‘Iranian’ proto-statehood. It is important to preface the specific line of argumentation by an acknowledgement made by both interviewed Iran-specializing historians that the former interpretation—one virtually unheard of outside of the Republic of Azerbaijan—can be argued to be the dominant mainstream view in Azerbaijani statebuilding narratives, while the latter is ostensibly more aligned with the international academic mainstream. Relying on the genealogical and the juxtapositional method of discourse analysis, the national prioritization of the former historical narrative over the latter can be attributed to it establishing chronologically

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<sup>318</sup> The interview ended up lasting almost two hours in total and was less structured and more free-flowing than the semi-structured interviews typical of the rest of my fieldwork. Professor Rustamova-Tohidi, whose idea it was to conduct the interview in this particular way, was overall the interlocutor taking more initiative, as well as being generally the more-strongly opinionated one.

deeper—albeit comparatively more contrived—continuities with the past. This is itself a feature of a ‘perpetuating’ discursive macro-strategy of ‘legitimization’.

As has been said, Iran is the most difficult among the historical polities of the region for Azerbaijan’s national-historiography discourse to downplay. For example, there is an inherent tension between centring the late-antiquity–early-mediaeval state of Caucasian Albania—as this sidelines contemporary Azerbaijani-speaking areas south of the Aras River—and centring Safavid Iran in the national historiography. The latter historical polity was a dynastic state ruled by a Shia Muslim Oghuz-Turkic-speaking elite and can be therefore plausibly argued to have been ‘ethnically Azerbaijani’, despite the inherently anachronistic nature of using the latter ethnonym. The Safavids are likely to have been of Kurdish—albeit Turkified at an early stage—‘ethnic stock’.<sup>319</sup> The academic camp arguing that the Safavids had formed the nucleus of Azerbaijani statehood—the majority view in the Republic of Azerbaijan—links the ascendancy of the *Qizilbash* military and imperial-court elite to a rise in prominence of the ethnic component within this pre-modern state. It would thus see the Safavid era as being on the cusp of a modern understanding of statehood, one that no longer exclusively follows a dynastic logic as the state’s fundamental feature, but instead newly brings an ethnolinguistic rationale to the fore.<sup>320</sup>

Countering this view is an academic camp in Baku which advertized itself to me as being more in line with the international academic consensus. This dissenting camp asserts that, historically-speaking, ‘Iran’ has had the advantage of being more inclusive as a concept. This is particularly the case compared to any marginal use of the toponym

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<sup>319</sup> Mathee, Rudi. “Safavid Dynasty”. *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 2008. URL: [iranicaonline.org/articles/safavids](http://iranicaonline.org/articles/safavids)

<sup>320</sup> Interview with Dr Vidadi Mustafayev, Baku, 29th of November 2021.

and ethnonym ‘Fars’ and ‘Farsi’ respectively, which is more directly analogous to the way the ethnolinguistically-connoted ‘Azerbaijani’ is employed in the contemporary Republic of Azerbaijan. For the first time since the Ilkhanids some two-and-a-half centuries prior, the Safavids reintroduced the term ‘Iran’ in a subset of official contexts.<sup>321</sup> As the aforementioned minority camp in Azerbaijan would argue, this paved the way for the eventual rise of civic nationalism in the modern era.<sup>322</sup> Dr Vidadi Mustafayev, part of the ‘majoritarian’ camp, would nonetheless caution against an over-emphasis on royal titles and the official names of polities, or the role they supposedly play. He asserts that Iranian Azerbaijan would be referred to, in historical documents of much of the mediaeval period, as part of *‘Irāq al-‘Ajam*, while territories to the north of the Aras would consist of semi-independent polities referred to, in contemporary Baku-Azerbaijani historiography, as *‘Azerbaïdžanskie Atabeki’* (Azerbaijani Atabeks).<sup>323</sup>

As Ismail I reunited said territories on both sides of the Aras and consolidated his rule by the introduction of *Ja‘farī* Shiism as state religion, he concretized the conceptual divide between the Oghuz-Turkic-speaking elites of the Safavid realms from their counterparts ruling over the neighbouring Ottoman Empire. In fact, the displacement of *Qizilbash* tribesmen previously subject to the Ottoman sultan’s suzerainty from Eastern Anatolia into the Iranian Plateau further consolidated the Safavid political powerbase and their rule over the Iranian plateau. In this sense, the *topoi* of confessional differentiation and the politicization of the latter denominational

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<sup>321</sup> For a compelling hypothesis of the reasons behind this revival of the toponym and administrative choronym ‘Iran’, see De Blois, François, “The Concept of Iran in Zoroastrian and Other Traditions”. The 19th Kutar Memorial Lecture, SOAS, London 21 April 2016. URL: [www.academia.edu/28561291/The\\_concept\\_of\\_Iran\\_in\\_Zoroastrian\\_and\\_other\\_traditions](http://www.academia.edu/28561291/The_concept_of_Iran_in_Zoroastrian_and_other_traditions)

In symbolic terms, one of the features that sets the Safavids apart from prior mediaeval dynasties—such as the Ilkhanids—is the re-introduction of the imperial title ‘shah’.

<sup>322</sup> Interview with Professor Solmaz Rustamova-Tohidi, Baku, 29th of November 2021.

<sup>323</sup> Interview with Dr Vidadi Mustafayev, Baku, 29th of November 2021.

loyalty are argued, in the majoritarian historian camp in Baku, to have represented a starting point for Azerbaijani statehood and nationhood.<sup>324</sup> Even the dissenting detractors of this mainstream Baku-Azerbaijani view see the Shia-Sunni divide as having played a key role in the ethnogenesis of the Azerbaijanis. Baku and the Absheron peninsula had been the power-centre of the Shirvanshahs, a Sunni Muslim semi-independent mediaeval polity ruled by a Persian-speaking dynasty of Arab origin. The political rise of the *Şafawiyya* order sounded the death knell of the Shirvanshahs. The particularly ruthless character of the Shirvanshahs' defeat by Shah Ismail Safavi and the former dynasty's physical elimination can reportedly be explained by the Shirvanshahs' Sunni orientation exacerbating neighbourly animosity, as well as by the need for Shah Ismail to assert regional hegemony by bringing quarrelsome *Qizilbash* factions into line.<sup>325</sup> A likely key motivation had nevertheless also clearly been Shah Ismail's desire to avenge the slaying of his father Shaikh Haidar and grandfather Shaikh Junaid by the Shirvanshahs.<sup>326</sup>

In the aforementioned 'minority camp' in terms of national historiography, represented by Professor Rustamova-Tohidi, Azerbaijan's 'actual' statehood—understood here as a polity or polities where the name 'Azerbaijan' would be occasionally attested in reference to polities north of the Aras River—supposedly begins with the so-called 'Azerbaijani khanates'. The latter largely-anachronistic term describes semi-independent polities such as, but not limited to, the Shaki khanate and the Nakhichevan khanate. All historical narratives present in the Republic of Azerbaijan assert the functional independence of said polities. When juxtaposed with Iranian and

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<sup>324</sup> Interview with Dr Vidadi Mustafayev, Baku, 29th of November 2021.

<sup>325</sup> Interview with Professor Solmaz Rustamova-Tohidi, Baku, 29<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>326</sup> Youssef-Jamali, Mohammad Karim. *The Life and Personality of Shah Isma'il (1487-1524)*. Thesis submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, University of Edinburgh. 1981: 125-126.

the international academic consensus—which both qualify these territories as still having been formally falling under Iranian suzerainty up to the 1804–1813 and the 1826–1828 Russo–Persian wars—there is a prominent discrepancy. The hegemonic national narrative in Azerbaijan insists on these territories having enjoyed *de facto* independence ever since the collapse of Safavid Iran, with a brief interruption of finding themselves fully reincorporated into the Afsharid realms by Nader Shah. On the whole, political developments north of the Aras are represented in the discourse as having been distinct from those than had taken place on the Iranian plateau. Imperial Russia’s annexation of these territories is met with a discursive creation of a historical counterfactual. The latter highlights the supposed interruption of an organic process, a gradual trajectory towards centralization and a hypothetical eventual conquest and incorporation of the weaker khanates into whichever khanate would have had been ascendant at that historical juncture. In this way, the linguistic tool of a counterfactual—deployed in service of a discursive strategy of assimilation—projects the rise and the consolidation of modern Western European polities such as France and Germany onto a South Caucasian context. The only difference is in the way this ‘natural’ consolidation had been prematurely thwarted by the southward expansion of Imperial Russia, itself a result of ‘precarious brinkmanship’ purportedly undertaken by said Khanates to balance the Ottoman, Romanov and Qajar powers each vying for control in the region. By the discursive means of predication, the quality of a ‘lost cause’ is ascribed to such balancing efforts, where the would-be pursuit of a goal of shaking off Qajar suzerainty had ostensibly backfired. The failed ‘omnibalancing’ ended in the full annexation of all the aforementioned khanates by Tsarist Russia, but only after what is advanced by the discourse—via the *topos* of self-victimhood—as decades of destruction inflicted by the

warring imperial armies on the ‘Azerbaijani people and lands’.<sup>327</sup> This *topos* again betrays the inherent tension between, on the one hand, anachronistically defining historical Azerbaijan more-or-less within the contemporary borders of the Republic of Azerbaijan and, on the other hand, paying lip-service to the Azerbaijani-speaking territories of northwestern Iran, as well as to the national-historical role the latter territories are imagined to have played.

The preference for one historiography over the other among intellectual elites in Azerbaijan has been explicitly attributed by my interlocutor to a desire to reduce the effectiveness of contemporary Iran’s diplomatic overtures carried out in the historico-cultural arena. This discursive strategy of dissimulation indicates the unwillingness for Azerbaijan’s history to be used as fodder for ‘Iran’s cultural propaganda’ on an international level of discourse.<sup>328</sup> The latter degree of conscious and openly-acknowledged awareness of the political expediency of historical narratives and the discursive strategies of national myth-making is a rare occurrence. The question remains whether Azerbaijani elites’ preference for specific *topoi* within nationbuilding and statebuilding in practice renders the republic truly less susceptible to ‘undue external meddling’.

Historiography would be brought up even with elite interlocutors who do not specialize in history, but have the hegemonic ‘mainstream elite’ understanding of the place of the Republic of Azerbaijan in the region and the world. For instance, when discussing contemporary Iran–Turkey rivalry and the ways in which Azerbaijan may find itself periodically caught up in the latter, the *topos* of Shia-Sunni regional rivalry, exemplified by the conflicts between the Ottomans and the Safavids—and the dynasties

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<sup>327</sup> Interview with Professor Solmaz Rustamova-Tohidi, Baku, 29<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>328</sup> Interview with Professor Solmaz Rustamova-Tohidi, Baku, 29<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

that succeeded the latter—would get brought up.<sup>329</sup> The *topos* discursively represents the Republic of Azerbaijan as being reluctantly dragged into this 21<sup>st</sup> century quasi-sectarian contest for geopolitical prominence, centred on the Middle East. The 16<sup>th</sup> century is deemed—by the discursive means of predication—to have had been pivotal for the genesis of the Azerbaijani nation. A net-positive cultural role is discursively ascribed to Iran for the modern Azerbaijani identity, as the conversion of the Oghuz Turks living north of the Aras River to Shia Islam ostensibly prevented—by the argumentative means of promulgating a historical counterfactual—Azerbaijanis from finding themselves losing any distinctiveness from Anatolian Turks in periods of Ottoman occupation and finding themselves culturally assimilated. To a lesser extent, and by a counterfactual analogy, the Oghuz-Turkic ethnolinguistic affiliation of Azerbaijanis also prevented their full assimilation into the ethnically-Persian majority that culturally dominates the Iranian plateau, both in the case of the territories that would become the Republic of Azerbaijan, as well as in the case of Iranian Azerbaijan.<sup>330</sup> Pivotal historical junctures, such as the 1514 Battle of Chaldiran, which marked substantial territorial gains for the Ottomans at the expense of the Safavids, would have the quality of a ‘strategic defeat, but moral victory of Shah Ismail over Sultan Selim’ discursively ascribed to them.<sup>331</sup>

Lastly—as far as contemporary representation of shared history pertaining to Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan is concerned—it simply cannot be overstated just how momentous the establishment of direct diplomatic relations (and the opening of civilian transport links) between Baku and Tehran has been constructed as having been,

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<sup>329</sup> Interview with Dr Azer Babayev, Baku, 24<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>330</sup> Interview with Professor Anar Valiyev, Baku, 23<sup>rd</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>331</sup> Interview with Anar Imanzade, Baku, 24<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

via the discursive means of predication. Having interviewed a member of the delegation—then in official capacity as *deputy head of mission*—that had opened newly-independent Azerbaijan’s embassy in Tehran in 1992,<sup>332</sup> one is given a glimpse of how historic of a juncture this had been perceived as both on the Baku-Azerbaijani and on the Iranian side of the equation. After all, both interpersonal contacts and direct Baku–Tehran or Baku–Tabriz relations had been precluded for much of the Soviet period, as exemplified by the *topos* of ‘*ayrılıq*’ (separation), explored here later.

*B) Reliance on metanarratives*

Another feature, one which cannot be entirely reduced to ethnolinguistic kinship dynamics, is the discursive construction of ‘in-group–out-group’ delineation permeating the bulk of said interviews. In striking alignment between the elites in the Republic of Azerbaijan and those in Uzbekistan, the Azerbaijani speakers on the ‘ex-Soviet side’ of the border tend to be collectively referred to as ‘*naši Azerbaïdžantsy*’ (Russian for ‘our Azerbaijanis’).<sup>333</sup> This is done with the discursive goal to disambiguate the latter category from contemporary Iran’s own Azerbaijani-speaking minority. In the case of Baku interlocutors, this discursive strategy can be plausibly attributed to the *topos* of a nation divided between the north and the south bank of the Aras River respectively. The discursive use of the shorthand ‘*naši Azerbaïdžantsy*’ in an offhand comment made by an interviewee in Tashkent—<sup>334</sup> a place where this Azerbaijani nationalist trope has no reason to have any traction and thus cannot be the explanatory variable here—nevertheless also indicates a region-wide identification with the ‘ex-Soviet’ subset of a given large ethnolinguistic group. I would therefore argue that this discursive formation

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<sup>332</sup> Interview with Dr Samad Bayramzade, Baku, 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>333</sup> Interview with Professor Solmaz Rustamova-Tohidi, 29<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>334</sup> Interview with Dr Guli Yuldasheva, Tashkent, 6<sup>th</sup> of May 2022.



of an ‘in-group–out-group’ delineation is present in elite consciousness of larger swathes of the ex-Soviet space, and would easily also include Tajiks and Uzbeks straddling the post-Soviet Central Asia–Afghanistan boundary. In the latter context, one would likely bear witness to the use of ‘*naši Tadžiki*’ and ‘*naši Uzbeki*’ as well, albeit more as useful linguistic shorthands than constituent instruments upholding a fully-articulated discursive strategy.

It is analytically useful to group the latter references in a broader category of region-specific ‘metanarratives’. Here, the specific historico-political *topoi* and the discursive strategies pursued with the help of the former are subordinated to the broader discursive construction of history and identity on a ‘meta’-level. Furthermore, it is at times conspicuous omissions from broader comprehensive narratives that tend to be just as noteworthy as the narratives’ explicitly stated content. The discursive strategy employed here by a subset of interviewees is that of avoidance, more specifically omission. Alongside said metanarratives, I also identify—by the juxtapositional and genealogical constituent methods of discourse analysis—areas of contested or directly contrasting interpretations of past events that lie outside of the scope of the mere disagreements over history and historiography of the type discussed earlier.

For the Republic of Azerbaijan specifically, the absence—or at least paucity—of any mention of Iran (or Russia for that matter) and Persian when discussing Azerbaijan’s history, especially in contexts where explanations glossing over Iran’s historical role require comparatively more contrived narratives, is indicative of a revealed preference in elite discourse. Culturally-speaking, one of my interlocutors would use the discursive tool of predication to characterize Azerbaijan—both the Republic of Azerbaijan and by extension also Iranian Azerbaijan—as ‘a trans-Caspian

outpost of Central Asia’.<sup>335</sup> While the Turkic ethnolinguistic links between the two regions are indeed undeniable,<sup>336</sup> much of the other area of commonality brought up by the interviewee—such as mediaeval schools of architecture leaving lasting traces in both the South Caucasus and Central Asia—gloss over Iran, and Persianate cultural legacies more broadly, as the single most prominent cultural ‘common denominator’. The only passing remark has been the scholar’s acknowledgement that the mediaeval architectural ‘Tabriz school’, seen everywhere in the historical *mahallas* of Samarkand and Bukhara is labelled as the ‘Iranian school’ by Iranian scholars. The discursive strategy of an outright omission of Iran is admittedly more warranted when the interview touches upon the *Jadid* intellectual and pedagogical movement, the impact of which was admittedly rather confined to the boundaries of the historically-Persianate Turkic- and Persian-speaking parts of Imperial Russia (but also to Chinese Turkestan). The aforementioned phenomenon had admittedly never gained major traction in Qajar Iran, where analogous intellectual currents of educational reformism had a somewhat different intellectual pedigree. This is mirrored by an absence of any explicit mentions of Russia or Russian for the Tsarist and Soviet periods, whenever the topic of Azerbaijan–Central Asia links has been brought up, despite the shared pan-USSR cultural references and *lingua franca* of Russian being the proverbial ‘elephant in the room’.<sup>337</sup> A limitation to drawing substantial conclusions from the latter omission is the sheer self-evidence of these links: It goes without saying that Russian remains the language of interethnic communication throughout the former Soviet space and that Soviet-era socialization facilitates the bulk of personal and professional interactions on both sides of the Caspian.

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<sup>335</sup> Interview with Dr Shahin Mustafayev, Baku, 29<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>336</sup> Excepting, of course, Persian-speaking Tajikistan

<sup>337</sup> Interview with Dr Shahin Mustafayev, Baku, 29<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

Another ‘meta-level’ element of Azerbaijani elite discourses pertaining to Iran is related to the use of toponyms, more specifically the choronyms<sup>338</sup> of historical polities. The aforementioned historiographic disputes centre partially around a disagreement whether the noun *Iran*, in the specific case of Safavid Iran in the ceremonial name *Molk-e Vasī‘ al-Fazā-ye Īrān* (‘The Expansive Realm of Iran’)—as postulated by Dr Vidadi Mustafayev and Professor Solmaz Rustamova-Tohidi to have been officially employed for the first time since the Ilkhanids—is indicative of the Safavid polity having been the first political incarnation of the Iranian nation, as the latter claims, rather than the political basis for future Azerbaijani nationhood and statehood, as the former scholar asserts. As was discussed previously, the minority view in Azerbaijan is presented by Professor Rustamova-Tohidi as the majority scholarly view internationally, namely the notion that the Safavid-era resumption of the use of the toponym and administrative choronym ‘Iran’ had laid the groundwork for a trajectory culminating in the modern Iranian polity of today.<sup>339</sup>

An additional ‘metanarrative’ in elite discourse, in the sense of a broad overarching explanation of why things are the way they are—or rather the latter’s metanarrative’s constituent element—is the *topos* of Azerbaijan having been, over the course of the modern era, stripped of its core constituent territories due to a ‘collusion of regional powers’. There is also remarkable consistency in elite respondents’ propensity to attribute the Republic of Azerbaijan’s contemporary western border to the *topos* of supposed (largely Russian-led) efforts to completely alter the demographic makeup of the historic khanates of Erivan and Nakhichevan by large-scale resettlement

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<sup>338</sup> The term here refers to a specific subset of toponyms associated with a region, a territory, or a geographically-defined polity

<sup>339</sup> Interview with Professor Solmaz Rustamova-Tohidi and Dr Vidadi Mustafayev, Baku, 29<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

of Armenian-speaking Christian populations.<sup>340</sup> While there is little historical evidence for these population movements having taken place on any meaningful scale, both *topoi* also choose to ignore the mainstream Iranian view—and international scholarly view more broadly—that these territories had been ceded by Qajar Iran to Imperial Russia as the main provision of the 1828 Turkmenchay Treaty. The cultural myth in Baku is one of functionally-independent khanates with an independently-minded local population necessitating being ‘subdued’ by means of ‘social engineering’. These historical debates are particularly contentious in the South Caucasus and accusations hinting at the *topos* of concerted efforts to alter the demography of specific regions abound on all sides.

Related is the discursive strategy of over-inflating the likely Azerbaijani-speaker demographic weight in contemporary Iran. Former Azerbaijani diplomat, ex-vice-ambassador to Tehran, and current deputy-head of Azerbaijan’s Academy of Sciences’ Oriental Institute’s controversial Department of Southern Azerbaijan Studies would refer to a 1941 Soviet survey supposedly carried-out in Soviet-occupied Iran that concluded that Azerbaijani speakers represent some 40 percent of the country’s total population, ahead of Persian native speakers.<sup>341</sup> This datapoint is extremely unlikely to have had been accurate back in the 1940s and is just as unlikely to be accurate when extrapolated to the modern day. In the mainstream (i.e. ‘non-irredentist’) intellectual circles in Azerbaijan, exemplified by the entirety—at least as far as I could tell—of my Baku pool of interlocutors, the main utility of this discursive strategy concerning Iran’s demographic balance is that it fuels a specific hope: An eventual future democratic Iran

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<sup>340</sup> Interview with Professor Solmaz Rustamova-Tohidi and Dr Vidadi Mustafayev, Baku, 29<sup>th</sup> of November 2021

It is unclear from these narratives where exactly would said Armenians have had come from, at least when referring to a near-century preceding the early-20<sup>th</sup> century mass displacement of those Armenians who had hitherto been Ottoman subjects.

<sup>341</sup> Interview with Dr Samad Bayramzade, Baku, 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 2021.

would become overwhelmingly Azerbaijani-speaker-dominated in terms of political representation—with Persians only coming in close second. Such a scenario would supposedly guarantee a geopolitical alignment with Baku and consequently serve as a ‘regional-power-multiplier’. This would support the notion that Iran *tout court* is not inherently disruptive of core Baku-Azerbaijani narratives of self, yet the aforementioned envisioned scenario is so fanciful and divorced from reality that its utility may well be in offering those perpetuating this metanarrative some plausible deniability.

Following up with the aforementioned discursive strategy of assimilation among Baku-Azerbaijani intellectuals, namely to disproportionately conflate key political and social developments within modern Iran with Iranian Azerbaijanis specifically, another conspicuous example would be the intellectual exercise within the aforementioned ‘Department of Southern Azerbaijan Studies’ of tentatively re-baptising the 1978-1979 Iranian Revolution as the ‘Tabriz Revolution’,<sup>342</sup> again mirroring the previously-mentioned preference for the latter qualifier in the realm of architectural styles. This is a conspicuous instance of an interlocutor employing the discursive tool of predication to reframe a well-known historical event. In line with linking the majority-Azerbaijani-speaking Iranian city with revolutionary foment ever since the 1905 Tabriz protests that had precipitated Iran’s Constitutional Revolution, the scholar would zoom in on the purportedly unique role played specifically by the protests in the city of Tabriz—40 days after the killing of protesting Qom seminarians by the Shah’s security forces in early-1978—as indispensable in precipitating Iran’s Islamic Revolution.<sup>343</sup> This would be in line with the intellectual trend of assimilating Iranian Azerbaijan with the role of

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<sup>342</sup> Another name suggested by Bayramzade was ‘Bahman Revolution’, in reference to the winter month in which the 1978 Tabriz protests took place. This ignores the fact that Bahman already is the point of reference for the Islamic Revolution commemorations in Iran due to a series of events that took place in early-1979, not early-1978.

<sup>343</sup> Interview with Dr Samad Bayramzade, Baku, 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 2021.

Iran's actual 'mover and shaker' as far as historical patterns of popular mobilization go. While containing a kernel of historical fact, this trend betrays a trope common among Baku intellectuals of over-fixating on Iranian Azerbaijan as the 'perennial explanatory variable' of Iranian domestic affairs. Interestingly, the interviewee's broader analysis of the Islamic Revolution is one of a historical materialist, emblematic of the author's Soviet-era educational background. With generational change underway in post-Soviet Azerbaijan, a Marxist historical analysis of this type is unlikely to be as readily embraced by the ascendant generation of younger scholars.

Another overarching narrative of a 'meta' nature that affects perceptions of Iran on the Azerbaijani side—one that is by no means confined to the elite level and is arguably therefore the most emotionally resonant—pertains to the 'Armenia–Iran–Azerbaijan triad'. The *topos* of 'duplicity' discursively represents Iran's formally-neutral stance in the Karabakh conflict as a mere smokescreen, not only for Tehran's supposed informal alliance with Yerevan, but also for profiteering off what is represented by the discourse as 'three decades of Armenian plundering of Karabakh and the adjacent, largely-depopulated, districts and stripping the latter of anything of value'. Livestock left behind by Azerbaijani internally-displaced villagers allegedly wound up sold at markets in northwestern Iran throughout the early 1990s, as reportedly also did tiles, window frames, doors and furniture that all could be traced back to ghost towns and depopulated ethnic-Azerbaijani villages in the then-Armenian-occupied districts of Azerbaijan.<sup>344</sup> It is in the context of this particular metanarrative framework of a lopsided 'Armenia–Iran–Azerbaijan triad' where the 2021 detainment of Iranian lorry drivers ostensibly headed to the city of Stepanakert (Xankəndi in Azerbaijani) by the

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<sup>344</sup> Interview with Dr Samad Bayramzade, Baku, 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 2021.

Baku-Azerbaijani authorities—a detainment that had been a logistical impossibility prior to Baku’s November 2020 military victory—would have felt particularly gratifying to many Azerbaijanis after said ‘three decades of continued ignobility’ tolerated by local Iranian officials. In the discursive framing of some of the interviewed Baku’s elites, there is an imperative to distinguish these incidents from roughly-concurrent instances of Iranian trucks being stopped by Azerbaijani customs officials when using Armenia’s north–south arterial road, which at the time happened to still use a small section of Azerbaijani territory, something that had not been an issue in Soviet times, but the imperative to enforce sovereignty over which had been deferred by the three decades of Armenian occupation.<sup>345</sup> The motivations behind these two sets of diplomatic incidents are represented—via the discursive means of predication—as completely separate in Baku, in stark juxtaposition to the way they had been received in Tehran where the nature of the two incidents had subjected to a discursive strategy of conflation.

Similarly divergent understanding has marked ways in which negotiations over a possible ‘Zangezur corridor’ have been represented in the discourse. Statements by authorities in Tehran and domestic reporting suggest an apprehension over formalized swaps of sovereign territory, potentially of the type that would sever an overland link between Iran and Armenia. In Baku, such concerns are countered by a discursive tool of predication. The aforementioned ostentatious apprehension voiced in Iran is deemed either dishonest or ignorant, as any transport link would not in any way involve a redrawing of international boundaries or create ‘facts on the ground’. Objections are further discursively mitigated by Baku’s reassertion that any deal—if signed—would

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<sup>345</sup> Interview with Professor Anar Valiyev, Baku, 23<sup>rd</sup> of November 2021.

merely allow for guarantees of duty-free overland access from the Azerbaijan ‘mainland’ to the Nakhchivan exclave. By doing so, it would reportedly function akin to analogous international arrangements such as the 1936 Montreux Convention concerning the naval use of the Turkish straits, or the murkier regime pertaining to Russia’s peacetime overland access to the Kaliningrad exclave. The hyperbole employed by Iranians whenever they exaggerate or misrepresent the impact of any future ‘Zangezur corridor’—thereby replicating the attitude of the anti-Pashinyan hardliners in Yerevan at the time<sup>346</sup>—allegedly betrays an apprehension over revenue and politico-economic clout being lost due to Iranian territory being no longer needed to supply the Nakhchivan exclave, should any workable arrangement be reached between the Republic of Azerbaijan and Armenia. The latter in an explicit point of intersecting considerations pertaining to material and immaterial connectivity in equal measure.

In the context of the Karabakh conflict, Iran’s past role of a weapons- and logistical-support-provider does not fit quite so easily with the aforementioned *topos* of (a duplicitous) Iran holding a uniquely pro-Yerevan bias, despite paying lip-service to the inviolability of Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity. In spite of the popular view prevalent in Azerbaijan, a discursive tool of predication associating Iran with the role of one of Armenia’s key arms suppliers over the course of the protracted conflict between the latter country and Azerbaijan over the Karabakh secessionist territory,<sup>347</sup> senior Azerbaijani officials now admit that in the early 1990s, Iran was the only country willing to provide Baku with weapons in the early months of the Karabakh conflict, thanks to the technical compatibility and Azerbaijani armed forces’ familiarity with Soviet-era munition, anti-tank mines and light weapons that Tehran had previously been

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<sup>346</sup> Interview with Fariz Ismailzade, on-line, 21<sup>st</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>347</sup> Interview with Fariz Ismailzade, on-line, 21<sup>st</sup> of November 2021.



purchasing in ample amounts from the USSR. Due to Moscow's continued military presence having been disallowed by the authorities of newly-independent Azerbaijan, Russia allegedly retaliated by only providing Baku with weaponry at inflated prices. At the same time, Turkey could not have politically allowed itself to become a major arms-supplier to Azerbaijan due to the latter's NATO commitments.<sup>348</sup> Iran's ambivalent role in the early 1990s disrupts the *topos* of duplicity—a metanarrative perpetuated in Baku of an entirely biased and one-sided treatment of the Karabakh issue by the authorities in Tehran, who would only pay lip-service to the aforementioned need to respect Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and to solidarity with the global Islamic *Umma*.

The last 'meta-association' with Iran ingrained in Azerbaijani consciousness that can serve as a useful comparison between Iran's reception in Baku—as contrasted to Turkey's image on both the popular and the elite levels—is in the local perception of goods produced in Iran and Turkey. While being more affordable, Iranian-made goods tend to have an underwhelming reputation in the Republic of Azerbaijan, especially compared to Turkish goods, which are generally associated with quality and reliability.<sup>349</sup> To this, one can add the popularity of Turkish media, greatly facilitated by a near-absent linguistic barrier. Even independently of the linguistic factor, Turkish pop culture is near-universally aspirational in Azerbaijan. State-sanctioned and state-media-promoted 'Iranian lifestyle'—itself quite removed from the reality of an urban middle-class Iranian family—is aspirational only among the most religious Shia Azerbaijanis, who tend to inhabit mostly the southernmost part of the post-Soviet republic. This last point is merely a brief departure from the otherwise-prevailing dynamic of immaterial

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<sup>348</sup> Interview with Dr Samad Bayramzade, Baku, 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 2021.

For a scholarly corroboration of the former point, see Kouhi-Esfahani, Marzieh. *Iran's Foreign Policy in the South Caucasus*. Routledge. 2019: 106-108.

<sup>349</sup> Interview with Dr Orkhan Baghirov, Baku, 26<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

connectivity in the sub-region, which tends to be broadly filtered through the contemporary prism of the Karabakh conflict<sup>350</sup>—as exemplified by the bulk of the examined metanarratives. The latter dispute is also the underlying source of constraints that the Republic of Azerbaijan is subject to in terms of material connectivity *vis-à-vis* Iran, as explored in the following section.

## **II) Geopolitical challenges in the context of proliferating material connectivity**

The aforementioned notions of soft power play a role in the sub-regional ‘material-immaterial connectivity’ dialectic. Lofty ideas and an excessively-idealized national self-image starkly contrast with actual ways regional relations need to be conducted on the ground. The material and political constraints render the conduct of bilateral and multilateral relations an arena of compromise and *Realpolitik*. The protracted—seemingly unresolvable—conflict over Karabakh has been a constant risk-factor over the course of three decades of independence of two out of the three republics of the South Caucasus. It had been the case also for non-ex-Soviet Iran—the country right on the border of which hostilities have been taking place. The autumn 2020 ‘breakthrough’ on the matter is also opening the prospect of reopening and expanding Soviet-era transport routes in a way that would have had seemed inconceivable just a few years ago, possibly downgrading the appeal of previously agreed-on transport project itineraries. Either way, November 2020 had—in the eyes of all parties involved—fundamentally altered the ‘hand’ that Baku and Tehran had each been ‘dealt’ up to that point. Unlike that Baku-Azerbaijani victory, the next major related development,

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<sup>350</sup> See page 123 for the shift of Baku-Azerbaijani attention away from ‘Southern Azerbaijan’ and towards territories of the historical khanates of Nakhchivan and Erivan.

namely the mass exodus of Karabakh Armenians in the early autumn of 2023—once it became clear their lives will no longer be protected by Russian peacekeepers—could obviously not have been reflected in these autumn 2021 interviews.

*A) Geopolitical rivalries, as exemplified by the protracted conflict over Karabakh*

No dyad of bilateral relations exists in isolation. The chapter that follows this very chapter—one centring Uzbekistan as a case study—demonstrates how the latter's ties with Iran are fundamentally informed by the Tashkent leadership's perceived role of independent Uzbekistan in its more immediate regional context of post-Soviet Central Asia (with a more recent discursive addition of Afghanistan). This does not appear to be the case with Azerbaijan, as the South Caucasus—or the Caucasus region more broadly—lacks a constituent territory or a contemporary polity that would serve as the region's demographic or historico-political core. Furthermore the South Caucasus has been beset by open interstate hostility that dwarves any skirmishes periodically flaring up on the Tajikistan–Kyrgyzstan border. As far as contemporary Azerbaijan–Iran relations are concerned—at least in the realm of specific predicative realizations in service of a discursive strategy of relativization—there is a solid case to be made by Baku scholars that this relatively minor bilateral relationship remains a function of the more consequential Turkey–Iran relationship.<sup>351</sup>

This is a noticeable departure from writings by Western European and North American scholars, who would predicate the Azerbaijan–Iran relationship as subordinate to the more consequential Moscow–Tehran dyad, at least as far as Tehran's

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<sup>351</sup> Interview with Professor Lala Jumayeva and Dr Azer Babayev, Baku, 24<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

side of the equation is concerned.<sup>352</sup> While both representations in the scholarly discourse are a reasonable approximation of actual geopolitical reality, the steady increase of specifically Turkey's regional role in the South Caucasus has been a *topos* brought up repeatedly in my Baku interviews. Ankara is seen as having once been fully deferential to Moscow on major regional security issue such as the Karabakh conflict. Some two decades later—and unlike Tehran, as I may well add—this is clearly no longer even remotely the case.<sup>353</sup> Over the course of the same period, Iran turned, from a vital-supply-lifeline provider to then *de facto* under-blockade Armenia,<sup>354</sup> into a regional power failing to ensure Turkey stays out of the Caspian Sea as a non-riparian state. Azerbaijan's military exercise carried out with Turkish support and circumscribed Turkish participation at the turn of the decade was received negatively in Tehran. That being said, the interviewed Baku experts have employed a discursive macro-strategy of perpetuation (more specifically justification), alongside that of downplaying (namely relativization), and defended the non-riparian state's participation on a pure technicality: The wording of the 2018 *Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea* on that matter is ambiguous, I am told. The interviewees likewise resorted to a discursive strategy of deflection by highlighting the fact that the Islamic Republic of Iran had not yet ratified the aforementioned treaty. Worse than the Republic of Azerbaijan's ties to Turkey, the former country's friendly ties with the Israel are a source of clear security concerns in Tehran.<sup>355</sup> This is something that any member of the Baku scholarly elite

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<sup>352</sup> Herzig, Edmund. *Iran and the Former Soviet South*. London: Chatham House, 1995: 17.

<sup>353</sup> Interview with Dr Azer Babayev, Baku, 24<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

Interview with Dr Samad Bayramzade, Baku, 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>354</sup> Interview with Ahmad Alili, Baku, 24<sup>th</sup> of November 2021, citing Thomas de Waal Early-1990s Georgia was too preoccupied by its own internal strife to be able—or willing—to provide its territory for the transit of vital Russian supplies to Armenia.

<sup>355</sup> Interview with Dr Vasif Huseynov, Baku, 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 2021.

Interview with Fariz Ismailzade, on-line, 21<sup>st</sup> of November 2021.

can easily comprehend, despite not holding the same ideological antagonism *vis-à-vis* ‘the Zionist entity’ as post-1979 Iran.

Those international politics scholars in Baku working—even tangentially—on Iran echo the sentiment of North American and Western European scholarship portraying contemporary Iran as a fundamentally pragmatic reactive player, rather than ideologically-driven proactive one. Given Tehran’s ‘geopolitically-weaker hand’, they see it as no surprise that Iran relies heavily on political provocation and contained escalation. While not particularly relevant to the post-Soviet Central Eurasian regional context, Iran’s use of regional proxies is seen in Baku as a way of leveraging Iran’s greatly limited material capabilities.<sup>356</sup> This generation’s regional watershed moment has been the November 2020 military victory of Azerbaijan over Armenia and the return of most occupied territories under Baku’s full control.<sup>357</sup> While Turkish—and to a lesser extent Israeli—support via sales of advanced weaponry were key in the victory and consequently further boosted the countries’ image in Baku, Iran’s public image among the elites and the general public of the Republic of Azerbaijan alike fell to an all-time low. ‘Waiting out’ the outcome of the renewed conflict was seen as tacit complicity with Armenia and thus confirmed—in the eyes of Baku-Azerbaijani observers—suspicions that Iran’s ostensible neutrality had merely been a smokescreen for a covertly pro-Armenian foreign policy—<sup>358</sup>yet again echoing the aforementioned ‘*topos* of duplicity’. There is a scholarly consensus that the immediate effect has been the downgrading on Baku’s relationships with Tehran. The discrepancy between the interviewees’ respective assessments has been in their evaluation of just how permanent

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<sup>356</sup> Interview with Professor Anar Valiyev, Baku, 23<sup>rd</sup> of November 2021.

Interview with Ahmad Alili, Baku, 24<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>357</sup> Since my fieldwork period, all of the territories have been brought under Baku’s control.

<sup>358</sup> Interview with Ahmad Alili, Baku, 24<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

the damage to the aforementioned bilateral relations has been. Bayramzade would assert that it will take decades before they get back to their pre-2020 levels—<sup>359</sup>a possible instance of hyperbole—while Dr Huseynov says it is a question of merely a few years, provided no new regional flare-up and no new conflict involving Israel takes place.<sup>360</sup> The latter scholar warns against Baku participating in Iran’s international isolation or meting-out further ‘punishment’. His reasoning was that such a stance would only further strengthen Iran’s bilateral relationship with Armenia and the economic interdependence between the two,<sup>361</sup> assuming the Turkey–Azerbaijan axis is slow to greenlight the lifting of the Turkish border-blockade of Armenia.

As far as Azerbaijan’s policy circles are concerned, Iran is here to stay. Continuing to strive for a working relationship is therefore a foreign-policy imperative. Ex-vice-ambassador Bayramzade would cite Iran’s one-million-strong standing army and its immense hydrocarbon reserves.<sup>362</sup> In terms of geopolitical calculations within this particular sub-region of Eurasia, Iran cannot simply be ignored, let alone contained. The elite resolve towards balancing relations with regional powers had solidified even further in the recent years. The 2008 war in Georgia and the 2014 Ukraine crisis had affirmed Baku’s determination to have as diversified of a network of diplomatic and economic ties as possible. Ostensibly this is in order to be as free as possible from the geopolitical orbit of its former quasi-imperial overlord. The latter is a preferable outcome for the Republic’s leadership to a counterfactual scenario where Azerbaijan gets pulled into the precarious predicament CIS countries such as Kazakhstan and

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<sup>359</sup> Interview with Dr Samad Bayramzade, Baku, 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>360</sup> Interview with Dr Vasif Huseynov, Baku, 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>361</sup> Interview with Dr Vasif Huseynov, Baku, 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>362</sup> Interview with Dr Samad Bayramzade, Baku, 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 2021.

Armenia currently find themselves in.<sup>363</sup> There is little doubt that Russia's invasion of Ukraine, an event that took place several months after my Baku fieldwork, solidified this resolve even further.<sup>364</sup>

*B) Baku–Tehran bilateral ties and diplomatic overtures*

It is easy to overstate the importance of any particular individual when identifying the historical developments of political relations between two or more countries. On the whole, it would be hard to claim that charismatic figures outweigh ideologies and entrenched political institutions in their impact on foreign policy. That being said, it was precisely the leadership changes and a leadership succession that took place in late-1980s–early-1990s Iran that informed the shift towards less ideological policy behaviour, as shown in the preceding chapter. Similarly, the second President of newly-independent Azerbaijan Abulfaz Elchibey was steering Azerbaijan's foreign policy in a highly ideological manner. With his pan-Turkist ethnonationalist outlook, he and his National Front party alienated Iran and the Russian Federation by their openly irredentist rhetoric pertaining to 'Southern Azerbaijan', and by wanting to downgrade political ties and abandon historical legacies associated with the Soviet period, respectively. This was all while re-centring the Baku–Ankara axis. It is therefore perhaps not a surprise that Elchibey's ousting in a 1993 coup is attributed on a popular level—as part of the *topos* of Azerbaijan's 'eternally colluding neighbours'—to a coordinated plot ostensibly orchestrated by Russia and Iran.<sup>365</sup> The ascendance of Heydar Aliyev to the presidency marked a reversal of most of the aforementioned

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<sup>363</sup> Interview with Ahmad Alili, Baku, 24<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>364</sup> As far as Tehran is concerned on that matter, decisionmakers find themselves in a 'double-bind' of seeking to reap the benefits of this regional reorientation, all while steering clear of alienating Russia—its only large strategic partner in the region.

<sup>365</sup> Cornell, Svante, "Iran: a reluctant neighbour". in Cornell, Svante (Ed.) *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*, Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2001: 314.

policies, with the noticeable exception of keeping the Baku–Ankara axis intact as a non-negotiable central pillar of Baku-Azerbaijani foreign policy.

When referring to the Republic of Azerbaijan’s contemporary relations with Iran, interviewees from the national elite would insist that the bilateral relationship is neither ‘friendly’ nor ‘cordial’. They would discursively juxtapose this coldness to the cordial personal ties maintained across the border at the interpersonal and non-governmental level.<sup>366</sup> The most widely cited issue has been the *topos* of mutual distrust.<sup>367</sup> It would be difficult to imagine high degrees of trust being maintained at the level of Baku–Tehran diplomatic contacts, given just how ‘pervasive distrust’ is also cited as the number one issue by members of the Baku IR scholarship elite (who also occasionally contribute to the latter country’s foreign policy with their expertise). This deficit of trust has an ambivalent twofold effect. Firstly, it discursively shifts the dyad into the realm of ‘high stakes’, securitizing it in the process. Secondly, it forces Baku-Azerbaijani decisionmakers to keep on incessantly engaging Tehran. Joining the ‘bandwagon’ and isolating Iran was never a serious option in Baku, given how large of a portion of the Republic of Azerbaijan’s border is shared with Iran and given how important of a country Iran is overall, despite its current protracted period of economic weakness. It is for this reason that Azerbaijan’s membership in the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) has the quality of being a ‘net positive’ ascribed to it by the discursive means of predication. Multilateral formats that engage key regional players are conversely predicatively represented in the discourse as an ‘absolute necessity for a small country like Azerbaijan’. In that respect, the Republic of

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<sup>366</sup> Interview with Professor Lala Jumayeva and Dr Azer Babayev, Baku, 24<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>367</sup> Interview with Professor Lala Jumayeva and Dr Azer Babayev, Baku, 24<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.  
Interview with Fariz Ismailzade, on-line, 21<sup>st</sup> of November 2021.



Azerbaijan being a member of ECO together with most other regional players—a club, however ineffectual, that happens to also include Iran—is just the outcome of Baku’s extreme openness to multilateralism. In this respect, the participation of the Republic of Azerbaijan in multilateral formats such as the Turkic Council—or even GUAM—would nonetheless be discursively placed on a higher priority-tier.<sup>368</sup>

The constantly-brought-up Karabakh conflict has been an arena which repeatedly ‘put the Azerbaijan–Iran bilateral relationship to the test’. The Baku–Tehran relationship in the early 1990s, during the ‘hot’ part of the Karabakh war, is assessed—in retrospect—as atrocious in actual fact, despite a veneer of cordiality,<sup>369</sup> reiterating the *topos* of Iran’s duplicity. This image is likely to be informed by the Baku–Azerbaijani November 2020 victory against Armenia and the latter’s ‘puppet breakaway republic’, which established the narrative of Tehran having missed its last chance to ‘set things right’ and rush to congratulate Baku for having reasserted its sovereignty and territorial integrity and regained control over the near-entirety of territories within its internationally-recognized borders—an implicit offer reproducing a *topos* of supposed Baku–Azerbaijani ‘magnanimity’ over ‘holding grudges’. Tehran’s prior offers of mediation by then-foreign minister Zarif and his peace plan were thoroughly rebuffed.<sup>370</sup> Iran did not ‘get the memo’, so to speak, and once it was clear, in November 2020, that Azerbaijan was going to achieve a strategic victory, the foreign ministry in Tehran and the executive more broadly are framed by Dr Huseynov to have ‘had been in panic mode’.<sup>371</sup> This chain of events is near-universally conveyed by my interlocutors by the *topos* of a ‘historic low-point’ for this regional dyad. That being

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<sup>368</sup> Interview with Fariz Ismailzade, on-line, 21<sup>st</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>369</sup> Interview with Dr Vasif Huseynov, Baku, 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>370</sup> Interview with Anar Imanzade, Baku, 24<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>371</sup> Interview with Dr Vasif Huseynov, Baku, 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 2021.

said, there has been no strong indication of bilateral trade having suffered from this. My interlocutor juxtaposes this low-point with the empirical fact that the volume of trade between the Republic of Azerbaijan and Iran remained stable over the same period.<sup>372</sup>

Another direct consequence of the November 2020 war are talks, currently under way, of rebuilding and reopening the Soviet-era rail line that copies the gentle profile of the Aras River Valley in an otherwise extremely rugged regional topography. It would necessitate Armenia allowing the Republic of Azerbaijan access to its Nakhchivan exclave by land, without requiring payment of customs fees and the like. Iran having financially benefitted from the wartime arrangement of being the only viable overland supply route for Nakhchivan, the Corridor would be immediately to the detriment of the Islamic Republic, both in terms of revenue, as in terms on further eroding Tehran's politico-economic clout. On the whole, my interviewees assert that an agreement between Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan would be bad news for Tehran's foreign-policy-makers.<sup>373</sup> Alili expressed his frustration over the fact that this plan, if it were to ever come to fruition—while undeniably a huge major success of regional diplomacy—would be a near-copy of a three-decades-old peace plan proposed by regional politics scholar Paul Goble all the way back in the early 1990s.<sup>374</sup> Implicit in this assertion is a discursive counterfactual—sustainable peace and regional stability could have already been achieved shortly after independence.

The role of diplomats and specific political figures is a topic that had also been addressed in a subset of the Baku interviews. In the assessment of some of my interlocutors, the 'baseline' of Iran's current foreign policy is greater levels of

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<sup>372</sup> Interview with Dr Orkhan Baghirov, Baku, 26<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>373</sup> Anar Imanzade gives the best case, as explored further in the following section.

<sup>374</sup> Interview with Ahmad Alili, Baku, 24<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

assertiveness than what was previously the norm under reformist or moderate governments. The latter tended to pay lip-service to dialogue and the idea of good neighbourliness. The Raisi administration therefore ostensibly implies a return to this baseline of less shying away from a more confrontational policy *vis-à-vis* countries such as the Republic of Azerbaijan, albeit still constrained by the exigencies of *Realpolitik*.<sup>375</sup>

A much more frequently cited political figure than Iran's President Raisi or Supreme Leader Khamenei has been Turkish President Erdoğan, even in the context of us discussing Azerbaijan–Iran bilateral relations. Aside from greenlighting the provision of logistical and military aid to Baku, the latter head of state was also quick to echo the jubilant sentiment reverberating across the Republic of Azerbaijan. Attending the victory parade in Baku in December 2020 as part of the Turkish delegation, Erdoğan recited key verses of the Soviet-era national poet Bakhtiyar Vahabzade's popular 1959 poem *Gülüstan*. A prominent representative of the genre—apparently beloved in both Soviet and independent Azerbaijan—of 'literature of longing', the poem bemoans the separation of the Azerbaijani people along the Aras River—arguably in itself the most salient *topos* of Azerbaijani national discourse.<sup>376</sup> The poem does so in a way that selectively vilifies Iran, all while making sure to not alienate Moscow—an understandable consideration, given the historical context. By evoking the aforementioned *topos* of 'an unfairly partitioned nation', Erdoğan—who was received in Baku as a hero in late 2020—echoed a sentiment that still persists in more nationalistically-oriented segments of the Baku-Azerbaijani population.<sup>377</sup> It is hard not

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<sup>375</sup> Interview with Dr Orkhan Baghirov, Baku, 26<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

Interview with Dr Vasif Huseynov, Baku, 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>376</sup> Vəhəbzadə, Baxtiyar. *Gülüstan*, 1959.

<sup>377</sup> Interview with Professor Lala Jumayeva and Dr Azer Babayev, Baku, 24<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

Interview with Dr Samad Bayramzade, Baku, 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 2021.

to interpret this likewise as a political provocation *vis-à-vis* Iran.<sup>378</sup> One of my interlocutors made a point of highlighting how Azerbaijan's state-run media tended to refrain from reporting on this Erdoğan's publicity stunt—a self-imposed 'media blackout', ostensibly out of respect for the feelings of Iran's political representatives and general public.<sup>379</sup> This is another instance of 'Baku's magnanimity' *topos*. Aside from lukewarm official pronouncements coming from Tehran during the November 2020 war, perceived in Baku as further revelatory of Iran's aforementioned 'covert pro-Armenian bias', an even stronger objection was communicated to me on grounds of Tehran not sending their country's delegation to the organized 'tours' of the newly-liberated territories.<sup>380</sup> Using the genealogical constituent method of discourse analysis, the latter objection proved ultimately ill-founded. Another interlocutor did confirm to me that, in the weeks preceding my visit of Baku, there had indeed been an Iranian delegation among those foreign-country officials visiting the abandoned ghost-towns of the southwest of the Republic of Azerbaijan.<sup>381</sup>

In spite of the *topos* of Baku–Tehran relations finding themselves 'at a historic low point', the period of my autumn 2021 fieldwork coincided with small indications of normalization. The respective countries' (vice-)foreign ministers officially met and signed an agreement on natural gas swaps<sup>382</sup> that would also involve Turkmenistan. Gas and oil swaps have been a creative arrangement used in past Iran–Central Asia trade relations to bridge regional infrastructure gaps and deficiencies. The decisionmakers in Baku are clearly willing to keep on engaging Iran, both diplomatically and politically.

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<sup>378</sup> This is an instance where the aforementioned immaterial connectivity can be weaponized against Iran.

<sup>379</sup> Interview with Anar Imanzade, Baku, 24<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>380</sup> Interview with Dr Samad Bayramzade, Baku, 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>381</sup> Interview with Professor Lala Jumayeva, Baku, 24<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>382</sup> Interview with Dr Vasif Huseynov, Baku, 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 2021.

Interview with Dr Samad Bayramzade, Baku, 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 2021.

Interview with Fariz Ismailzade, on-line, 21<sup>st</sup> of November 2021.

One interviewee interprets this ongoing readiness as Baku's long-term strategy to create more complex economic interdependence and therefore decrease the likelihood of any eventual future hostilities. Flagrantly excluding Iran from key regional initiatives would apparently undermine this goal.<sup>383</sup> Following this logic, physical connectivity and specifically overland transport infrastructure projects represent an area which, by its very nature, serves as a 'positive-sum game' in the eyes of Baku elites. It is hard to imagine these new material links not placing the pre-existing immaterial connectivity linking the post-Soviet republic with Iran into starker relief yet.

This upward trend in the bilateral relationship—from the historic low of late 2020—discerned during my fieldwork has since been disrupted by a series of provocations and escalations. The period between the autumn of 2022 and the spring of 2023 followed the predictable pattern of Iranian armed forces conducting military drills in ostentatiously close proximity to the border with the Republic of Azerbaijan. A few months after these manoeuvres, four Iranian diplomats working at Iran's embassy in Baku had been expelled from the Republic of Azerbaijan. This time around, additional events may have contributed, such as a seemingly-random firearm attack targeting the Azerbaijani embassy in Tehran in early 2023.<sup>384</sup> Furthermore, links were made by Iranian investigators to an Azerbaijani citizen identified to have been among the co-conspirators of a deadly attack on a Shia Muslim shrine in the city of Shiraz in the autumn of 2022, the responsibility for which had since been claimed by *Dā'ish*.<sup>385</sup>

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<sup>383</sup> Interview with Fariz Ismailzade, on-line, 21<sup>st</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>384</sup> To this day speculations abound in the Republic of Azerbaijan that this was no random act by a civilian with a personal grievance, contrary to what the official narrative would suggest.

<sup>385</sup> Iddon, Paul. "Iran, Azerbaijan tensions heighten risks of military conflict". *Middle East Eye*. 22 April 2023. URL: [www.middleeasteye.net/news/prospect-military-conflict-between-iran-and-azerbaijan](http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/prospect-military-conflict-between-iran-and-azerbaijan)  
"Why Iranians are calling for war with Azerbaijan?" *Middle East Eye*. 11 April 2023. URL: [www.middleeasteye.net/news/iran-azerbaijan-war-are-calling-why](http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iran-azerbaijan-war-are-calling-why)

*C) Trade relations against the backdrop of an intensification of physical connectivity*

For Central Eurasia, large-scale connectivity projects represent the biggest ‘game-changer’ of the past couple of decades. By involving Asian powers that are endowed with much greater financial capacity than any of the states on which we are focusing here, Central Asia, the South Caucasus and Iran arguably all have much more to gain than if they were just forced to ‘make do’ with their own limited means of large-infrastructure-project-financing. The Chinese-led ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ (BRI) is the most prominent contemporary case, but all analogous projects share the key feature of their dividends being long-term and strategic in nature. A different—yet still extremely consequential—transport axis, this time financed largely by the emerging Asian power of India, is of relevance for the Azerbaijan–Iran economic relationship. The International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC) aims to connect the Indian port of Mumbai with the European part of Russia and, by extension, European markets further afield, all via Iran. The Republic of Azerbaijan, a relative latecomer to the project, is supposed to provide its territory and its Caspian Sea shipping lanes to the Corridor. Furthermore, INSTC’s offshoots would connect the main north–south transport axis with post-Soviet Central Asia, as well as with Afghanistan. No competing project—China’s BRI included—offers a north–south-oriented alternative for that part of Eurasia.<sup>386</sup>

My Baku interlocutors would mostly discuss inter-governmental memoranda of understanding signed on the completion of specific segments of the INSTC. Given Iran’s poor capacity to finance large-scale projects of the sort, the Republic of

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<sup>386</sup> See Azizi, Hamidreza. “Iran and the Eurasian Transport Initiatives: Short-term Challenges, Long-term Opportunities”. *Caucasus International*, 8(2) 2018: 123-135.

Azerbaijan voiced the idea of lending the former a half-billion USD loan in 2016 to help complete the remaining Astara–Rasht leg of the a rail link between Iran and ex-Soviet Azerbaijan, something that never materialized.<sup>387</sup> Russia stepped in more recently, effectively committing to bankroll the project though a roughly one-and-a-half-billion-dollar loan.<sup>388</sup> In complete contradiction to past commitments and snubbing the involvement of the Republic of Azerbaijan as one of the key stakeholders of the INSTC, at the time of my Baku fieldwork there was also talk of India allegedly committing to allocate 3 billion USD on a rail line that would circumvent the territory of the Republic of Azerbaijan altogether. Said link would scale the whole rugged southern Armenian ‘panhandle’—the province of Syunik—as a transport corridor from Iran instead, with the ostensible approval of Tehran. The latter may signal Iran’s desire to further prop up a north–south link involving Armenia without the participation of Azerbaijan, all while maintaining its monopoly on being the sole overland-provisions-supplier for Azerbaijan’s Nakhchivan exclave.<sup>389</sup> This echoes, yet again, the *topos* in Baku of Iran’s duplicity. The plan would require use of Georgian territory for an eventual rail link to Russia, something it currently lacks if it were to avoid the territory of the breakaway Abkhazia. According to the policy analysts interviewed, any such project would be rendered a massive waste of resources, should the Soviet-era Zangezur rail corridor be renewed for a mere fraction of the costs of a Syunik link, ultimately achieving the same

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<sup>387</sup> Interview with Dr Orkhan Baghirov, Baku, 26<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

There was a rail link during the Cold War linking Iran to the Soviet Caucasus, via Julfa in Nakhchivan. This link fell into disuse and disrepair with the onset of the Karabakh war, on the eve of Baku-Azerbaijani independence.

<sup>388</sup> “Iran, Russia sign \$1.6bn contract to build Rasht-Astara railway”. *IRNA*, May 17, 2023. URL: [en.irna.ir/news/85113739/Iran-Russia-sign-1-6bn-contract-to-build-Rasht-Astara-railway](https://en.irna.ir/news/85113739/Iran-Russia-sign-1-6bn-contract-to-build-Rasht-Astara-railway)

<sup>389</sup> Interview with Fariz Ismailzade, on-line, 21<sup>st</sup> of November 2021.

Interview with Dr Orkhan Baghirov, Baku, 26<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

The region is traditionally known to Azerbaijani speakers as ‘Zangezur’. The Zangezur corridor nevertheless refers to a distinct axis, copying the Aras River Valley and roughly parallel to any would-be rail transport project done in Armenia’s Syunik region, which would zigzag through the Lesser Caucasus range, rather than cutting right across it.

goal of linking the tri-border-area Armenian town of Meghri with Armenia's demographic core of Yerevan. Yerevan–Baku talks will feature the former offering the latter Zangezur transport link in exchange for security guarantees pertaining to the unobstructed Armenian use of the Lachin corridor.<sup>390</sup> The prospect of some degree of normalization of Yerevan–Baku relations had been inconceivable before the early 2020s, as the reopening of the Soviet-era lowland corridor connecting Iran with Yerevan, via Nakhchivan, had never figured in the realistic calculations for any north–south transport axis. The elephant in the room now for New Delhi, Tehran, Baku and Moscow is the question whether to retroactively conceive of it as a core future segment of the INSTC or not.<sup>391</sup>

In Azerbaijan, the prospective Zangezur corridor would be an achievement of much symbolic importance, but also of a long-term strategic value, long before being able to see any tangible economic dividends.<sup>392</sup> The main immediate benefit would be overcoming the bulk of the peacetime challenges inherent to a country endowed (or cursed) with a territorial exclave. As far as other regional players are concerned, I am told that the Zangezur corridor—alongside the INSTC and north–south connectivity in the region more broadly—would benefit Moscow more than it would benefit Baku.<sup>393</sup> I nonetheless subject this assertion to the juxtapositional constituent method of discourse analysis, highlighting how other interviewee responses assert that the Republic of Azerbaijan is the country with the biggest relative stake in the completion of the

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<sup>390</sup> Interview with Dr Vasif Huseynov, Baku, 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 2021.

Interview with Dr Orkhan Baghirov, Baku, 26<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

This bargaining chip has since been effectively destroyed by Baku.

<sup>391</sup> Interview with Fariz Ismailzade, on-line, 21<sup>st</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>392</sup> Interview with Ahmad Alili, Baku, 24<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

Interview with Dr Orkhan Baghirov, Baku, 26<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>393</sup> Interview with Professor Anar Valiyev, Baku, 23<sup>rd</sup> of November 2021.



INSTC.<sup>394</sup> In relation to Turkey, the country associated with the *topos* of being ‘the one that saved the day’ in November 2020, in the eyes of the Baku-Azerbaijani public, Ankara also has much to gain from a successful outcome of negotiations over the Zangezur corridor. Imanzade would draw attention to an analysis published by the Iranian *Tasnīm* news agency that expresses apprehension over Turkey being the biggest winner of November 2020. Not only did the military victory purportedly bolster Turkey’s aspirational image as a modern secular state model, but it also amplified pan-Turkic sentiment in the wider region—including in Iranian Azerbaijan. A Zangezur corridor coming to fruition would also ensure a direct unobstructed link between Baku, Nakhchivan and Eastern Turkey.<sup>395</sup> Such an assessment underplays—either as a deliberate discursive strategy of obfuscation or simply by not giving it too much thought—the fact that this would likely be the case in peacetime only. A rough analogy—dampening Turkic ethnonationalist designs on controlling the lands stretching, in an uninterrupted manner, from the Balkans to the Caspian coast—has been the closing of the Turkish straits to Russian military vessels or the EU restricting Russian use of Lithuanian territory to bridge the ‘Suwałki Gap’ in the spring of 2022. There is no reason to assume that Armenia could not do the same under similar circumstances with the Zangezur corridor.

The last relevant factor of north–south connectivity in Eurasia had been recent tectonic change in Afghanistan. The latter country was supposed to be involved in the most ambitious side-branch of the INSTC and part of the reason why the Iranian deep-sea port of Chabahar is being built to begin with. My objections pertaining to the viability of the latter project following the Taliban takeover of Kabul were met with

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<sup>394</sup> Interview with Fariz Ismailzade, on-line, 21<sup>st</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>395</sup> Interview with Anar Imanzade, Baku, 24<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

unwarranted optimism by Baku specialists—to be echoed even more widely by my Tashkent interlocutors. India, I am told, is unlikely to diminish its involvement with Chabahar and the road and rail links that are to connect the latter port with the southeastern Iranian city of Zahedan,<sup>396</sup> and Afghanistan’s copper mines further afield. This could count as discursive strategies of trivialization—seeking to downplay legitimate concerns of regional security—a strategy this time echoed over the course of both legs of my doctoral fieldwork.

In the context of the aforementioned China-led BRI, my interlocutors acknowledged that Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan are competitors insofar as they both offer their territory up to alternative Eurasia-spanning east–west transport corridors. The multi-modal ‘Middle Corridor’—a primarily-railway route that would traverse the Caspian Sea and connect to the recently-inaugurated Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway link—never featured in any of the original BRI ‘pitches’. Unlike the southern east–west transport corridor involving Iranian territory, the Middle Corridor necessitates the transfer of goods onto and off a ship half-way through the journey. The challenge of these additional steps and resulting bottlenecks were met with a discursive strategy of mitigation and downplaying on the side of my interviewees. Logistically-analogous transfers are required anyways, whenever there is a change in rail gauge—an inevitability whenever one enters or exits post-Soviet territories via rail. It is thus, I am told, just a matter of practicality to subsume the largely-already-in-place Middle Corridor under the BRI umbrella.<sup>397</sup> Even more than the Republic of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan would apparently be the key beneficiaries of the aforementioned corridor, as it dramatically decreases their dependency on transit via

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<sup>396</sup> Interview with Dr Orkhan Baghirov, Baku, 26<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>397</sup> Interview with Dr Orkhan Baghirov, Baku, 26<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

Russia.<sup>398</sup> After the geopolitical changes brought about by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, this need to diversify transport routes had clearly become even more acute. The Middle Corridor reduces the appeal of both a primary Iran-traversing and a Russia-traversing BRI corridor, two constituent projects already rendered less viable by the economic sanctions imposed on the latter two countries. Needless to say, Baku's elites have a vested economic and strategic national interest in seeing the Middle Corridor become the east-west 'transport route of choice' for China.

The interviewed Baku-Azerbaijani elites cite a national imperative for diversification. Azerbaijan's relatively small proven oil reserves and the low global oil prices of the past decade—despite the latter having already come to an end—precipitated a search for a new national geoeconomic vision. The solution found would be becoming a regional hub, be it for regional energy infrastructure networks, or for Eurasia-spanning road and rail linkages.<sup>399</sup> A Republic of Azerbaijan that diversifies away from hydrocarbon production would also become a more suitable trade partner for Iran, as the two countries' current import-export profile is far more competing than complementary. As far as alternative energy sources are concerned, Dr Bayramzade bemoaning Tehran purportedly blocking all hydropower projects on the Aras River<sup>400</sup> can be juxtaposed with Dr Baghirov 'setting the record straight', and affirming that a joint Azerbaijan–Iran hydropower project is actually currently under way on the latter waterway.<sup>401</sup>

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<sup>398</sup> Interview with Anar Imanzade, Baku, 24<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>399</sup> Interview with Dr Orkhan Baghirov, Baku, 26<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

Interview with Fariz Ismailzade, on-line, 21<sup>st</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>400</sup> Interview with Dr Samad Bayramzade, Baku, 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>401</sup> Interview with Dr Orkhan Baghirov, Baku, 26<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

Azerbaijan has—for at least since the late 2000s—represented the primary envisioned natural-gas supplier for the EU’s Southern Gas Corridor. The latter series of pipelines is used—albeit in a scaled-down iteration from the original perhaps-over-ambitious project—to cover some of the energy needs of southeastern Europe and Italy. I was told by one the researchers interviewed that Shah Deniz—Azerbaijan’s largest natural-gas field—cannot cover all the natural-gas needs of the Southern Gas Corridor. It is thus just a question of time before the EU starts seeking ways of adding Turkmenistan’s gas to the Corridor to cover this supply deficit. This is why the trans-Caspian pipeline is framed, by the specific linguistic means of predication employed in service of a discursive strategy, as ‘crucial’ in helping the European common market achieve energy security.<sup>402</sup> Beyond this, it would get the Republic of Azerbaijan one step closer to becoming the aforementioned regional hub for the transport of energy. Natural gas supplies for European markets and households have since become an even more pressing issue in the context of Russia’s February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Furthermore, since my autumn 2021 Baku fieldwork, the energy discourse has moved onto the topic of scaling-down the trans-Caspian pipeline project and building a much shorter Caspian interconnector between pre-existing pipeline links to Azerbaijan’s and Turkmenistan’s respective Caspian seabed gas fields instead. The latter would not require nearly as much new construction, and would incur a mere fraction of the time and financial resources needed for the originally-planned pipeline.<sup>403</sup> While signing the aforementioned 2018 Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea has been a key positive development for Azerbaijan–Turkmenistan relations, the latter documents still gives any riparian state—Iran and Russia included—the right to effectively veto the

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<sup>402</sup> Interview with Professor Anar Valiyev, Baku, 23<sup>rd</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>403</sup> Discussion on “Episode 18 - The Impact of a Trans-Caspian Pipeline”, *Spotlight on Central Asia* Podcast, Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs, June 16<sup>th</sup> 2022.

construction of new seabed pipeline projects, ostensibly ‘on environmental grounds’. Since Russia’s Lukoil has business interest in Caspian Sea oil and gas exploitation, Moscow will reportedly be less inclined to use this veto power.<sup>404</sup> Tehran, in turn, would have a stronger political interest in objecting, since northern Iran would provide the most viable alternative transit route of getting Turkmenistan’s gas to Europe, via Anatolia. To this one can add Tehran’s desire to become a supplementary supplier for the Southern Gas Corridor.

In the economic and transport spheres, the possibility of eventual normalization of Turkey and Azerbaijan’s relations with Armenia would impact Iran in many ways. According to my Baku interlocutors, Armenia is the only post-Soviet republic of Central Eurasia one could consider an ally of Iran.<sup>405</sup> If—or rather when—the Turkey-imposed closure of the Armenian border is reversed, the latter country’s consumer market, where Turkish goods that have been shipped there clandestinely via Georgia can be found in abundance,<sup>406</sup> is predicted to get inundated with said imports.<sup>407</sup> An expected outcome would be a more-advanced degree of economic interdependence—one that weakens, rather than strengthens, Iran’s politico-economic standing in the South Caucasus. To get an idea of scope, any bilateral trade relationship in the region gets dwarfed, by an order of magnitude, by the volume of trade carried out between Russia and Turkey.<sup>408</sup> An ostensibly Western ally, Turkey has not actually put in place any economic sanctions in response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Within the region,

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<sup>404</sup> Interview with Fariz Ismailzade, on-line, 21<sup>st</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>405</sup> Interview with Fariz Ismailzade, on-line, 21<sup>st</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>406</sup> As of the time of writing, there are no longer legal barriers in place in Armenia disallowing the imports of Turkish goods

<sup>407</sup> Interview with Anar Imanzade, Baku, 24<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>408</sup> Interview with Dr Orkhan Baghirov, Baku, 26<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

it is still the extraterritorial power of the US sanctions unilaterally re-imposed on Iran that hamper any large-scale infrastructure projects involving the Islamic Republic.<sup>409</sup>

To conclude, for decisionmakers and elite observers in Baku, Azerbaijan's main goal in the sphere of connectivity and trade is to diversify and achieve a high degree of economic interdependence on its own terms—not interdependence achieved on anybody else's terms. Such terms may well benefit Iran economically and geopolitically, but only as a mere byproduct of the aforementioned objective in Baku. Iran falls short both of domestic transport connectivity of energy (resources) along a north–south axis, as well as of sufficient oil refining capacity, and has thus benefitted from past and present oil and gas swap arrangements.<sup>410</sup> It is an ingenious instance of 'material connectivity' that stretches the very qualifier 'material' to its semantic limits: The swap operation itself is quasi-virtual in nature (see my previous point on page 70). However, if any such dependency on Iran for provisioning the Republic of Azerbaijan's own non-contiguous Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic can be avoided, thereby decreasing Iran's political leverage (something examined in the section immediately succeeding this one), Baku should—at least judging from my interview responses—seek to do so.<sup>411</sup> The currently-negotiated Zangezur corridor would be a key component on the path of achieving that strategic goal.<sup>412</sup>

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<sup>409</sup> Interview with Fariz Ismailzade, on-line, 21<sup>st</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>410</sup> Garibov, Azad; Ibrahimov, Rovshan. "Geopolitical Competition in the Central Asia: The Dynamics of Relations with Azerbaijan". *Center for Strategic Studies*, IX, Baku, 2013: 43.

<sup>411</sup> Interview with Dr Samad Bayramzade, Baku, 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>412</sup> Interview with Ahmad Alili, Baku, 24<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.  
Interview with Anar Imanzade, Baku, 24<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

### III) Immaterial connectivity enabling the use of specific political leverages

Against the backdrop of renewed and intensifying material connectivity comes a reinforced awareness of the immaterial connectivity linking large swathes of West Asia to Central Eurasia—a connectivity monopolized, downplayed or outright countered intermittently by Moscow during the Soviet period. Much like vulnerability stemming from material-connectivity-based asymmetric economic interdependence, immaterial connectivity produces analogous perceptions of vulnerability, mostly on the Baku-Azerbaijani side. These intersubjective links have already been discussed insofar as exploring ideas—often contradicting those of neighbouring nation-states—of Azerbaijan’s own ‘national’ past, alongside metanarratives informing the Republic of Azerbaijan’s ‘imagined place’ in the wider region. Metanarratives and entrenched *topoi* are admittedly something near-impossible to completely dissociate oneself from. This present piece of scholarship is no exception in that respect. For instance, the *topos* of a number of newly-independent post-Soviet countries being finally able to resume a ‘natural’ level of cross-border (referring here to the relatively short-lived—but nevertheless ‘distorting’ in some ways—Soviet-era geopolitical boundary) interactions with non-post-Soviet lands with which they supposedly share greater affinity can be seen as permeating the present dissertation topic. This could plausibly be attributed to my own influences as someone who was born in freshly-emancipated-from-the-Soviet-orbit Czechoslovakia, where equivalent sentiments favouring a reinvigoration of the then-suspended notion of a coherent territorial unit—in this specific case that of a ‘Central Europe’—had abounded. For all territories called ‘Azerbaijan’, the compounding variable is one large ethnolinguistic group—native speakers of Azerbaijani Turkish in this case—having had found themselves drawn into two

divergent geopolitical orbits some seven-to-ten generations ago. Much more recently, the smaller of the two subsets found itself with an independent polity of its own, with Azerbaijanis as the ‘titular nation’, all while the majority of the world’s Azerbaijani speakers reside next door, in northwestern Iran, as an in-practice-legally-unacknowledged minority within the Iranian state. But already at the point of the aforementioned subset’s attainment of independence in 1991, both groups had at that point been diverging for several generations.

*A) The divergent paths of border-straddling ethnic kin—a view enabled by Baku’s ‘invention of Southern Azerbaijan’*

The Azerbaijani-speaking territories on both sides of the Aras River exhibit the characteristics of quasi-laboratory conditions of a ‘control group’ and a ‘treatment group’ for categorically distinct executive blueprints of specific political, economic and sociological theories. In the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, both populations’ starting point can be argued to have been roughly equivalent—though arguably the population of the southernmost portions of the Republic of Azerbaijan had the closest starting point to those in neighbouring Astara and Ardabil. In that sense, they are not unlike the following: the populations of historically-Polish territories from the late-18<sup>th</sup>-century partitions until the First World War, those living in East and West Germany throughout the Cold War, or the ongoing hyper-securitized division of the Korean Peninsula. The main difference is that, despite the *topos* abounding among historians in Baku of a supposed ‘partition of Azerbaijani lands’ between Russia and Persia in the early 1800s, that division took place not against the backdrop of any precedent of recognizable statehood, let alone the precedent of statebuilding, nationbuilding, or even of the very modern concept of nationhood, for that matter. Correspondingly, the anachronistic idea



of political ‘reunification’ of both sides of the Aras has virtually no genuine mainstream traction among Azerbaijani intellectual elites. The tenacity of the latter belief was more of a curious datapoint when hearing Dr Samad Bayramzade refer to the convictions of his academic superior—the overtly-irredentist-minded nonagenarian Dr Akram Rahimli formerly chairing the Department of Southern Azerbaijan Studies. Interestingly, despite the aforementioned *topos* being well attested in the secondary literature which looks at the national pedagogy of newly-independent Azerbaijan,<sup>413</sup> the notion of a ‘divided nation’ was not brought up or even alluded to in a single instance in any of my Baku interviews. The reason for this is that—among the interviewed elites specializing in history and contemporary political relations—the *topos* may simply not be very compelling due to its ahistorical nature. A secondary interpretation consists of possible apprehension of not wanting to be met with incredulity by a ‘Western’ academic interlocutor—and a resulting discursive strategy of ‘avoidance’. A third explanation—one that is most relevant for the following section of this present chapter—is the romantic idealism of the early 1990s<sup>414</sup> having been juxtaposed with the sobering reality of Azerbaijani speakers on each side of the Aras having developed in ostensibly ‘incompatibly divergent’ ways.

This does not mean that the existence of ethnic kin, populating several Iranian provinces as a local majority, does not have any emotional resonance in the Republic of Azerbaijan; quite the contrary. Elements of Azerbaijan’s popular culture and the very fact that the aforementioned ‘Department of Southern Azerbaijan Studies’ continues to operate under the administrative aegis of the state-run and state-funded Academy of

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<sup>413</sup> Shireen Hunter, “Azerbaijan: Search for Identity and New Partners” in Ian Bremmer and Taras, Ray (Eds.) *Nation and Politics in the Soviet Successor States*, 1993, 237.

<sup>414</sup> Dr Bayramzade documents the proliferation of Azerbaijani-language publishing in Iranian Azerbaijan and the overall optimism of that period.

Sciences can attest this. I would however argue that the *topoi* of ‘*ayrılıq*’ (separation)<sup>415</sup> and ‘*qohum*’ (kin) are discursively independent from the aforementioned *topos* of ‘collusion between regional powers’. The latter argumentation strategy is one of either an anachronistically-named historical polity—or the modern nation—of Azerbaijan having had found itself separated due to both past and ongoing machinations by the regional powers of Russia and Iran. If anything, the elite understanding is one of Azerbaijanis as a discrete ethnolinguistic group having been historically denied a shared political development and elite acculturation as one autonomous or independent polity. This fact purportedly disallowed—as the previously-elaborated counterfactual would suggest—an organic ethnogenesis that would have resulted in contemporary nation-statehood.<sup>416</sup> The interviewees in Baku would concede that Tehran has done a rather good job at using its own form of ‘ethnicity-downplaying state-nationalism’ in keeping the bulk of the population of Iranian Azerbaijan invested in the Iranian national project instead.

Anecdotal accounts of formal and informal interactions between Azerbaijani speakers, citizens of Azerbaijan and Iran respectively, and experiences of those travelling across the Aras are a useful datapoint, insofar as perceptions of the aforementioned divergence between the two populations are concerned. Crossing from Soviet Azerbaijan into Iranian Azerbaijan had been impossible for several decades. The father of Professor Rustamova-Tohidi—the septuagenarian Iran-specializing historian at the Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences’ Oriental Institute—was an Ardabil-born pro-Soviet Iranian comrade of Pischevari. Alongside the bulk of his collaborators, he fled to Soviet Azerbaijan after the short-lived Soviet puppet republic centred on Tabriz was

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<sup>415</sup> ‘*Ayrılıq*’ is the key semantic element of the ‘literature of longing’ genre.

<sup>416</sup> Interview with Dr Samad Bayramzade, Baku, 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 2021.

reincorporated by force into Pahlavi Iran in 1946. Rustamova-Tohidi's family was finally allowed to travel to Iran and visit relatives in 1991. This is illustrative of the four-and-a-half-decades of the Aras River representing an impervious boundary precluding the maintenance of interpersonal ties between kin. As a tangentially-related fieldwork observation—compared to Tashkent, I did not meet anybody in academia or policy circles in Baku who would bring up the fact of having more recent family ties to Turkey or Iran, for instance via marriage. In Tashkent—by contrast—I spoke to many members of the university-educated elite who were married to citizens of non-post-Soviet Muslim-majority countries of the wider region, such as Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Those interlocutors lacking direct family links to Iranian Azerbaijan who have nonetheless had opportunities to travel there maintain that 'being a Shia Muslim Iranian' appears to remain the primary element of the individual and collective political identity of Iranian Azerbaijanis.<sup>417</sup> This comes as a stark contrast to the comparatively more secular and Turkic-ties-accentuating Republic of Azerbaijan. This had already produced tension when the formation of diplomatic ties was in its infancy in the early 1990s. Offering guests alcohol had for decades been a sign of hospitality in Soviet Azerbaijan, in official and unofficial contexts alike. When meeting an official Iranian delegation in the early 1990s, the latter move would invariably create a *faux pas*.<sup>418</sup> Unless the population of Iranian Azerbaijan becomes more secular or younger citizens of the Republic of Azerbaijan become more religious, the disparity in religiosity will

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<sup>417</sup> Interview with Anar Imanzade, Baku, 24<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>418</sup> Interview with Professor Solmaz Rustamova-Tohidi and Dr Vidadi Mustafayev, Baku, 29<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

likely continue to be major grounds for mutual ‘othering’ of the populations across the border.

Conversely, decades of Tsarist and Soviet rule brought the Muslims of the South Caucasus and those of Central Asia closer together, most conspicuously at the elite level. What sets these contacts apart from those entertained in the previous centuries, however, is that said contacts have been carried out in ways that has been consistently circumventing Iran. Similarly, they were functioning in ways that have been downplaying the role of shared Persianate elite culture. Besides undeniable Turkic ethnolinguistic affinity, the aforementioned unacknowledged immaterial Persianate elite ties are the main explanatory variable as to why educated Baku-Azerbaijanis have always found it so easy to fraternize with members of the urbane Central Asian elite—most notably of the city-oases of Samarqand and Bukhara, but also from Tashkent or the cities of the Fergana Valley. Early examples of the new, unmediated-by-the-Iranian-plateau-or-Persian-language, nature of these ties include the opening of the first modern-style school in Samarqand by a *Jadid* intellectual from the Azerbaijani city of Ganja (then officially called Elizavetpol’). Another example would be the non-negligible readership in the Russian protectorate of Bukhara of the satirical Tiflis-based vernacular-Azerbaijani-Turkish-language magazine *Molla Nasreddin*. The popularity of Azerbaijani theatre troupes and bands playing traditional music at weddings in Central Asia—a phenomenon started in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—lasted well into the late-Soviet period.<sup>419</sup> These developments were understandably quite insulated from intellectual currents and developing art forms in Iran—and to a lesser extent in Ottoman Turkey and Afghanistan—over the course of the same period. If anything, as far as

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<sup>419</sup> Interview with Dr Shahin Mustafayev, Baku, 29<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

Iran–Central Eurasia contacts are concerned, the trend of cultural diffusion was overwhelmingly unidirectional in those decades—one from the Russian Caucasus to Iran.

The divergence between Shia Muslim Persianate lands of either side of the Russian border from 1813 onwards appears, in some ways, to replicate the divergence precipitated by Shah Ismail's adoption of Shia Islam in the 16<sup>th</sup> century which inadvertently created a lasting cultural and political rift between Iran and the Persian-speaking lands further east in South and Central Asia. While overemphasized and clearly expedient for the new Soviet administration, it was this kernel of truth that was the basis for early-20<sup>th</sup> century Bukharan scholar Sadriddin Ayni's ambitious undertaking of the codification of a new literary standard and a greater formalization of a divergent literary tradition for 'Tajiki Persian'. The latter had been framed—from the 16th-century-onwards—as sufficiently and ever-increasingly autonomous *vis-à-vis* the Iranian literary tradition to warrant such a project.<sup>420</sup> This also legitimizes discursive strategies of dissimulation employed in Central Asia that disaggregate the Persian language from the Iranian Plateau or Fars Province (the latter having been the birthplace of its Old and Middle varieties), explored in the following chapter.

Possibly out of admiration for the Twelver Shia 'Eroniy' (a Central Asian rendering of *Īrānī*, referring here to descendants of Iranian merchants, as well as of Khorasani victims of Turkmen slave raids) community and their achievements in Central Asia, Dr Shahin Mustafayev—himself evidently a pan-Turkist—also highlights the contribution of one Said Rizo Alizoda. A Bukharan Eroniy descended from an Iranian family hailing from the Khorasani oasis-city of Sarakhs and a colleague of most

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<sup>420</sup> See Bečka, Jiří. "Tajik Literature from the 16<sup>th</sup> Century to the Present". in Rypka, Jan (Ed.) *History of Iranian Literature*. 1968: 483-606.

prominent *Jadid* scholar of all of Russian Turkistan—Mahmudkhodja Behbudiy—Alizoda helped codify Tajiki Persian before getting killed in the Stalinist purges. His pedagogical approach to learning Persian is described as having been so innovative, that his Persian-language textbooks are still being republished and in wide use to this day in Pakistan.<sup>421</sup>

A decision that also created lasting rifts across the Persianate world was the choice of shifting from the Perso-Arabic script to the Latin script in the 1920s and subsequently to the Cyrillic script in the 1930s for the native tongues of the Muslim *natsional'nosti* (ethnic groups or 'nationalities') of the Soviet Union.<sup>422</sup> The post-Soviet-collapse decision in Baku to revert to the Latin script was replicated in Turkmenistan and—much more sluggishly—in Uzbekistan. More recently, Kazakhstan's (or rather, as it may soon officially be as a consequence of this reform, '*Qazaqstan*') leadership has committed to do the same, followed by discussions in Kyrgyzstan's political circles about whether to follow suit.<sup>423</sup> Only in Tajikistan have vague commitments to reintroduce the Perso-Arabic script been voiced ever since the 1990s<sup>424</sup>—ostensibly to facilitate contacts with Iran and Afghanistan—with little-to-no actual follow-through. Dr Shahin Mustafayev would attribute the 'Latinization' of the Turkic Republics of Central Asia to the leading example of Azerbaijan's own language-

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<sup>421</sup> Interview with Dr Shahin Mustafayev, Baku, 29<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>422</sup> Djalili, Mohammad-Reza. "Un monde iranien aux multiples identités" [The Iranian World between Multiple Identities], in Djalili, Mohammad-Reza et al. (Eds.) *Le monde turco-iranien en question* [The Turco-Iranian World under Challenge]. Paris, Karthala; Genève, IHEID, 2008: 62. See Perry, John. "Script and Scripture: The Three Alphabets of Tajik Persian, 1927-1997". *Journal of Central Asian Studies*, 2(1) 1997: 2-18.

<sup>423</sup> "Počemu Kyrgyzstan rešil ne perehodit' na latinitsy" [Why Kyrgyzstan decided not to switch to the Latin alphabet] *TRTnaRusskom*, 24<sup>th</sup> of April 2023. URL: [www.trtrussian.com/magazine/pochemu-kyrgyzstan-reshil-ne-perehodit-na-latinicu-12950744](http://www.trtrussian.com/magazine/pochemu-kyrgyzstan-reshil-ne-perehodit-na-latinicu-12950744)

<sup>424</sup> Atkin, Muriel. "Tajikistan's Relations with Iran and Afghanistan". The National Council for Soviet and East European Research, George Washington University. November 1992: 5.

reform implementation, bolstered by the Ankara–Baku cultural and geopolitical axis.<sup>425</sup> This could be easily overstated, as Turkey is undoubtedly the more aspirational of the two countries, at least as far as the secular Turkic-speaking Central Asian republics are concerned. Analogous claims mirroring a *topos* of an ‘aspirational Republic of Azerbaijan’ would be made by another interviewee. Iranian Azerbaijan has supposedly greatly benefitted from decades as a neighbour to a polity—referring here to both Soviet-era and independent Azerbaijan—that has been both ‘economically prosperous’ and ‘European and worldly in outlook’.<sup>426</sup> In actual fact, it appears as if Azerbaijan’s regional self-image is being ‘artificially propped up’ by the much more influential and aspirational Turkish Republic. It is thus not completely unlike the United Kingdom’s self-perception as a country—its international soft power being ‘propped up’ by the hegemonic global standing of the United States, largely on grounds of happening to share the same language.

The Karabakh conflict has been a recurring opportunity for cross-border kinship ties—and to a lesser extent solidarity with co-religionists—to get mobilized. For all the lip-service paid to international Muslim solidarity by the political and religious authorities of the Islamic Republic of Iran, elites in Baku highlight how little has actually been done by Tehran to assuage the Baku-Azerbaijani-authored ‘*topos* of duplicity’ and of Iran’s ostensibly pro-Armenian bias harboured by Tehran throughout the protracted conflict. That being said, Iran’s image in the early 1990s was bolstered by both humanitarian aid and political pressures *vis-à-vis* Armenia that likely prevented wartime atrocities against Azerbaijani civilians. Iran’s considerable early-response aid

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<sup>425</sup> Interview with Dr Shahin Mustafayev, Baku, 29<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>426</sup> Interview with Dr Samad Bayramzade, Baku, 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 2021.

While boisterous, this description was made mainly in juxtaposition with Iran’s poorest border provinces of Sistan and Baluchestan—which borders Pakistan and Afghanistan—and Kordestan—which borders Iraq—in mind.

provided to the internally displaced and Tehran's mediation efforts are argued by my Baku interlocutors—employing the discursive means of predication—as having built up considerable good will in the Republic of Azerbaijan, further bolstered by an instance of Tehran allegedly having prevented a war crime by Armenian forces against three thousand Azerbaijani civilians stranded in Zangilan district by granting them an escape route via Iranian territory.<sup>427</sup> This 'good will' is predicated with the discursive qualifier of 'having been all used up' over the course of the subsequent couple of decades, not least following the November 2020 war. Turkey's overt assistance, contrasted with Iran's strategy of 'waiting things out', further shored up Turkey's image in Baku. This is associated with lasting damage incurred by Iran's popular and elite image in the Republic of Azerbaijan, ostensibly for 'decades to come'. The 2020 Karabakh war is also framed as having even further elevated Turkey's prestige in Iranian Azerbaijan, with Iran's own restive Azerbaijani-speaking population being portrayed by Bayramzade as Tehran's single most significant concern of an internal security nature.<sup>428</sup> Baku scholars highlighted anecdotal evidence of greater sympathy for the Azerbaijani side of the 2020 war—especially if compared to the early 1990s<sup>429</sup>—among the Azerbaijani speakers of northwestern Iran, as among the more religious middle class 'Bazaaris' and the working class in Tehran.<sup>430</sup> This is corroborated by other sources,

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<sup>427</sup> Interview with Anar Imanzade, Baku, 24<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

Interview with Ahmad Alili, Baku, 24<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

On a different occasion, Iranian political pressure allegedly prevented the Armenian forces from overrunning Nakhichevan.

<sup>428</sup> Interview with Dr Samad Bayramzade, Baku, 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 2021.

The latter idea of Tehran's concerns were independently seconded by Dr Vasif Huseynov

See Tomek, Jan. "Political Implications of Iran's Ethnolinguistic Diversity: Border-straddling minorities and the spectre of Azerbaijani and Kurdish 'kin-states'" 2024 (article upcoming)

<sup>429</sup> A whole major chapter—seemingly lost to time—has been fairly-enthusiastic Iranian support for the Baku-Azerbaijani side of the conflict all the way up to the ascendancy of Abulfaz Elchibey in the summer of 1992.

See Kouhi-Esfahani, Marzieh. *Iran's Foreign Policy in the South Caucasus*. Routledge. 2019: 106-108.

<sup>430</sup> Interview with Dr Shahin Mustafayev, Baku, 29<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.



with unprecedented society-wide expressions of sympathy for the Baku-Azerbaijani side of the conflict observable all the way to the very top of the Iranian state apparatus.<sup>431</sup>

As far as cross-border kinship ties are concerned, a younger-but-professionally-senior interlocutor working in the Azerbaijan's main foreign-policy think tank asserts—via the specific linguistic means (in service of a specific justificatory discursive strategy) of nomination and predication—that Iran's own 22-million-strong Azerbaijani-speaking minority is a key factor in Baku's desire to maintain working relations with Iran.<sup>432</sup> This suggests a concern that a deterioration of bilateral relations could conceivably re-introduce a border regime akin to that of the Soviet era, when heavy restrictions on extended-family cross-border visits and broader ethnic-kin contacts were in place. This expressed apprehension is adjacent to the aforementioned *topos* of '*ayrılıq*' (separation). It is still clearly infused with particular emotional resonance in the Republic of Azerbaijan, given that it would be featured even in national discourse replicated by individuals who lack meaningful individual recollections of the Soviet period. Needless to say that the continued proliferation of material connectivity linking the two countries and the resulting greater economic interdependence render such an emotionally-resonant 'worst-case scenario' far less likely.

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<sup>431</sup> Herzig, Edmund. Transcript of "Oxford Analytica morning conference meeting". Oxford, 13 October 2020.

<sup>432</sup> Interview with Dr Vasif Huseynov, Baku, 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 2021.

*B) Religious and cultural commonality as a factor of Iran's soft power*

i) Religious soft power

Another area of Iran–Azerbaijan relations where the immaterial-connectivity-feature of shared demographic characteristics always loom large as a consideration in cultural diplomacy is Iran's soft power and Azerbaijan's elite perceptions thereof. For instance, Azerbaijan is one of only four countries<sup>433</sup> in the world where Twelver Shia Muslims represent a confessional majority. To the relief—at least in retrospective—of the secular-minded portion of the Republic of Azerbaijan's population, Moscow's rule insulated Soviet Azerbaijan from any would-be politico-confessional outreach of the still-full-of-revolutionary-zeal post-1979 Islamic Republic of Iran. By the time Azerbaijan gained its independence in late-1991, Tehran's leadership, sapped by the high toll of a near-decade of war with Baathist Iraq and deeply affected by the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, is believed by my interlocutors to have had abandoned any real ambition of 'exporting the revolution'.<sup>434</sup> Azerbaijan being a traditionally Shia-Muslim-majority country nonetheless renders it—according to other interlocutors, employing a discursive strategy of threat-construction—particularly vulnerable to 'Iran's meddling in its internal affairs'.<sup>435</sup> As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, the prevailing tool of Iranian soft power—outside strategically-vital neighbouring regions such as Afghanistan, the Persian Gulf, and the Levant—can be characterized as broadly cultural and not always religious in nature. In this chapter sub-section I therefore contrast the

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<sup>433</sup> Iran is obviously the other *Ja'fari*-Shia-majority state, alongside Bahrain and Iraq. Twelver Shias may also be reaching a demographic plurality among the non-refugee population of multi-denominational Lebanon.

<sup>434</sup> Interview with Professor Solmaz Rustamova-Tohidi, Baku, 29<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

Interview with former ambassador of Uzbekistan to Tehran Professor Dr Abdusamat Khaydarov, Tashkent, 28<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

<sup>435</sup> Interview with Dr Vidadi Mustafayev, Baku, 29<sup>th</sup> of November 2021

two prongs of Tehran's soft power in the Republic of Azerbaijan—one prioritizing religion as a tool, and one largely relying on history and culture.<sup>436</sup>

The interview questions prepared for my meeting with Professor Anar Valiyev had been largely informed by his contribution to an edited volume on soft power and on the role of religion in the South Caucasus. To conceptualize the receptivity of a Baku-Azerbaijani audience to religious messaging, it is useful to keep in mind that the Republic of Azerbaijan is currently among the world's most secular Muslim-majority societies, alongside a handful of other polities with an experience of Communist rule, namely Albania and Kazakhstan.<sup>437</sup> The periodic Soviet-era crackdowns on religious authorities strengthened Islamic practices of an informal 'folk nature' at the expense of orthodox forms Shia or Sunni Islam. As a consequence, half of the population of contemporary Azerbaijan glosses over the theology distinguishing Shiism and Sunni Islam, instead claiming to be 'just Muslim'. This can imply a concerted effort to see oneself as 'non-denominational'—analogous to a subset of Christians in Europe and North America—or be simply attributed to a lack of interest in—or ignorance of—the dissimilarities of formal doctrine, ritual and practice, in favour of an identification with informal 'folk Islam' instead—an effect of decades of systematic Soviet crackdowns on theologically-literate local elites. The aforementioned half of the population tends to identify as 'Muslim' for reasons of tradition and identity, rather than by following the precepts of the religion on a daily basis. In contrast to this, some one-third of the population—disproportionately represented by the south of the country and in pockets across the Absheron Peninsula—consider themselves followers of a specific Twelver

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<sup>436</sup> The utility of such a dichotomy was pointed out to me by Anar Imanzade

<sup>437</sup> "The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society". *Pew Research Center*, April 30, 2013. URL: [www.pewresearch.org/religion/2013/04/30/the-worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-overview/](http://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2013/04/30/the-worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-overview/) The same polling indicated that Baku-Azerbaijanis, out of all polled Muslim nations, least see Shia-Sunni differences as a source of domestic tensions.

Shia *marji' ut-taqlīd* ('source of emulation')—a useful proxy for daily religious practice among *Ja'farī* Shia Muslims.<sup>438</sup> As no Baku-Azerbaijani religious leader currently holds the required qualifications for a *marji'* status, this inevitably means a third of the country is following the legal scholarly opinion of a foreign-country-based *mujtahid*—a source of apprehension for the leadership of a secular state that is particularly sensitive to anything resembling a form of interference in its internal affairs. Presumably as a way to undermine Iran's influence in the Republic of Azerbaijan, the latter country's highest religious authority—the *Sheykh-ul-Islam*—moved away from following Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei as *marji'* in 1998, starting to recognize instead the scholarly authority of the Iraq-based Ayatollah Sistani.<sup>439</sup> The fight over shared intersubjective understandings on either side of the Aras clearly goes all the way into the spiritual domain. The aforementioned example shows how top-down political decisions can have a clear bearing on the intensity of immaterial connectivity between the two countries and not always merely on latter's interpretation in national discourse.

A domestic actor cited by researchers in Baku as a tool of Iran's soft power projection is the illegal-since-the-late-1990s Islamic Party of Azerbaijan. The latter political formation rejects secular nationalism and pan-Turkic solidarity, ostensibly espousing its own form of Russian-centric Eurasianism combined with elements of Iran-inspired political Shiism. Its geopolitical outlook is therefore pro-Iran, pro-Russia, but distrustful of Turkey. Despite the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan operating outside the law and despite only a third of the population of Azerbaijan being practicing Shia Muslims, opinion polls conducted in the last decade put the number of citizens of the Republic of

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<sup>438</sup> Valiyev, Anar. "Iranian Soft Power in Azerbaijan – Does Religion Matter?" in Jödicke, Ansgar (Ed.) *Religion and Soft Power in the South Caucasus*, Routledge. 2018: 88.

Admittedly the polling data was a few years old already at the time of publication and may plausibly present an already-outdated picture.

<sup>439</sup> Ibid., 90.

Azerbaijan who ‘trust’ this political force or ‘trust them somewhat/partially’ at a staggering 45 percent. While potentially a statistical artefact—or perhaps a ‘protest vote’ of sorts in a context where ethical precepts unique to Shia Islam find some resonance among those opposed to the authoritarian *status quo*—this contrasts with the incredibly low number of people in Azerbaijan who view the Islamic Republic of Iran in a positive light. In the latter case, the polling question may have admittedly produced a statistical artefact of its own, as the wording skewed the responses towards an assessment of Iran as a prospective emigration destination, a desire virtually unheard of in the Republic of Azerbaijan. In the area of religious soft power, Iran held, for decades, a near-monopoly on the publication of Azerbaijani-language religious pamphlets and other religious literature—offering no plausible deniability since they were written in the Latin alphabet and therefore unambiguously destined for post-Soviet Azerbaijan—until an Azerbaijani government crackdown in the early 2010s. In 2013, Iranian charities working mostly with the country’s poor and destitute—as well as with IDPs who had fled Armenian-controlled Azerbaijani territories to languish in the outskirts of large cities—had their license revoked by the Baku-Azerbaijani government, citing a level of economic prosperity achieved over the course of two decades of independence that had ostensibly rendered post-Soviet Azerbaijan ‘no longer a charity case’.<sup>440</sup>

Less reflexively-negative responses by state authorities have met Iran’s alleged efforts to mobilize the religious sentiments of members of the Azerbaijani-speaking diaspora outside of the Republic of Azerbaijan. This would be the case in eastern Georgia, which is home to some compact Shia Muslim Azerbaijani-speaking historic populations, as well as for Baku-Azerbaijani labour migrants in Russia and Ukraine. In

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<sup>440</sup> Ibid., 91-95.

Georgia's historical Kartli-Kakheti region, already some 60 percent of local Azerbaijanis consciously identify with Shia Islam—a larger number than in the Republic of Azerbaijan. One of my elite interlocutors would also make claims of an Iranian aim among the Baku-Azerbaijani diaspora of stirring animosity towards the current secular regime in Baku and towards the Aliyev family. These activities abroad and Tehran's religious and political proselytization activities in the Republic of Azerbaijan alike are something reportedly on the radar of the national intelligence and political leadership. To avoid diplomatic escalation with Tehran, Dr Huseynov claims, the authorities in Baku instead choose to deal with these activities discreetly, or at times outright turn a blind eye to them.<sup>441</sup> This appears to be another instance of the aforementioned *topos* of 'Baku-Azerbaijani magnanimity and self-restraint'. This *topos* of the Republic of Azerbaijan patiently putting up with Iran's subversion and consciously avoiding 'making a fuss' could easily be seen as patronizing, as it suggests that in Azerbaijan–Iran relations, a constant of Baku's approach is to proverbially 'take the high road', even in the face of provocations by 'bad-faith actors'. While accepting the premise of Shia Islam being a considerable source of Iran's soft power *vis-à-vis* the Republic of Azerbaijan, foreign-policy researcher Alili sees Iran as fundamentally pragmatic, with Islam merely being a handy instrument of regional *Realpolitik*. These two narratives are not necessarily contradictory. It is specifically at times when political expediency and Shia-Muslim solidarity are pitted against each other in Tehran's decisionmaking considerations where the juxtapositional constituent-discourse-analysis

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<sup>441</sup> Interview with Dr Vasif Huseynov, Baku, 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 2021.

method nevertheless reveals the latter policy principle's tendency to find itself sacrificed in favour of the former principle of cynical pragmatism.<sup>442</sup>

The last element of Iran's religiously-informed soft power in the Republic of Azerbaijan are trends and future prospects, as conceptualized by members of the Baku elite. The aforementioned Alili sees Tehran deeply invested in Azerbaijan's domestic trends. Iran would be happy to see Baku-Azerbaijani society become more religious over time. This is not only relevant for the post-Soviet South Caucasus, but also for the aim of maintaining the socio-political *status quo* in Iranian Azerbaijan, south of the Aras. Aside from this potentially strengthening of intra-Shia solidarity in the region, religiosity tends to be inversely proportional to the salience of ethnonationalist sentiment and pan-Turkism—*topoi* equated with an existential threat to Iran as a state.<sup>443</sup> The older generation of educated Baku residents frames the issue of national levels of religiosity with more acute apprehension. Unlike the young think tank fellows, the septuagenarian researchers at the Oriental Institute of the Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences worry that Azerbaijan's societal cornerstone of people, on the whole, subscribing to a secular worldview is being eroded with generational change.<sup>444</sup> A generational gulf has purportedly formed between those who underwent most of their socialization in the Soviet period and those who did not. Assuming the latter logic is at least a partial reflection of reality, Iran's religious overtures have the potential to be ever-more effective in the coming decades.

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<sup>442</sup> Interview with Ahmad Alili, Baku, 24<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>443</sup> Interview with Ahmad Alili, Baku, 24<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>444</sup> Interview with Dr Vidadi Mustafayev, Baku, 29<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

## ii) Cultural soft power

The non-religious component of Iran's soft power consists chiefly of millennia of shared history and intermittent shared statehood. The aforementioned reluctance to see the latter as 'life under Iranian dynasties' from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onward has been explained by the aforementioned apprehension about Iran's soft power, a view in which history is chiefly a tool to be weaponized.<sup>445</sup> These concerns notwithstanding, what sets the modern-day territories of Iran and Azerbaijan apart from that of their neighbours—especially from those using languages and dialects closely related to Azerbaijani Turkish and Iranian Persian—is the previously-discussed half-millennium of politico-religious divergence precipitated by Shah Ismail Safavi's introduction of Twelver Shia Islam as the state religion of the Safavid realms.<sup>446</sup> While originally politico-denominational in nature, the practical impact of this divergence also on the secular dimensions of culture in the sub-region cannot be overstated.<sup>447</sup> A Shia theological precept that can easily have a secularized incarnation is ceasing to be bound by political loyalty, should a ruler systematically fail to deliver justice and turn into an oppressive tyrant instead. Related is the Twelver-Shia emphasis on social justice.

A curiously-absent-from-my-interviews area of soft power are minor diplomatic spats over the historical figures that both the Republic of Azerbaijan and Iran lay claim to. Nizami Ganjavi is seen as Azerbaijan's national poet, despite having written in

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<sup>445</sup> Interview with Professor Solmaz Rustamova-Tohidi, Baku, 29<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>446</sup> This is reflected by the intersubjective understanding of the contemporary Tehran elite that the immaterial connectivity shared with the Republic of Azerbaijan is more substantial than that shared with Tajikistan, something contradicted by the secular ethnolinguistically-oriented subset of educated Iranians. One can speculate of the presence of an analogous Baku-Azerbaijani dynamic *vis-à-vis* the conceptual standing of 'Turkey versus Iran'.

<sup>447</sup> Interview with Anar Imanzade, Baku, 24<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.



Persian and having most likely been Iranian by extraction.<sup>448</sup> Another curious area is the Safavid Shah Ismail being commemorated in the Republic of Azerbaijan more as a poet—writing under the *nom de plume* Ḥaṭā'ī—of the vernacular Oghuz dialect that would become Azerbaijani Turkish, than as a statesman.<sup>449</sup> The commemoration of anti-Abbasid rebel Bābak Ḥorramdīn in post-Soviet Azerbaijan may more be a relic of the prior ideological era.<sup>450</sup> None of these historical figures being brought up in the interviews could indicate a degree of indifference over these potential areas of diplomatic tension, possibly outside extremely narrow nationalist-intellectual circles.

A less intuitive area of Iran's soft power—as seen by elites in Baku—is Tehran's alleged support of Talysh ethnonationalists. The Talysh—often associated on the Iranian side of the border with the closely-related Tats<sup>451</sup>—are likely a remnant, alongside the aforementioned, of those Old-*Āzarī*-language-speakers who had not been subject to complete Turkification. Assuming these political links actually exist, Tehran could leverage the historical rivalry between Turkic groups and Iranic speakers. The compact Talysh-speaking population in the southernmost portion of the Republic of Azerbaijan in close proximity to the Iranian border, added to the unusually-religious character of border-adjacent parts of the Republic of Azerbaijan<sup>452</sup> make them

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<sup>448</sup> Storey, Charles Ambrose; de Blois, François. *Persian Literature - A Biobibliographical Survey: Volume V Poetry of the Pre-Mongol Period*. Routledge; Curzon; 2nd revised edition, 2004: 363.

<sup>449</sup> One of the roughly dozen of Baku's district is named 'Xətai', after Shah Ismail.

<sup>450</sup> The aforementioned Oriental Institute is named after the Soviet-Azerbaijani historian Ziya Bünyadov—murdered under mysterious circumstances linked by some to Iran a mere five years after Azerbaijan's independence—who wrote extensively on the Khurramites.

<sup>451</sup> As speakers of Northwestern Iranian dialects they are different from Azerbaijan and Dagestan's eponymous minorities using the ethnonym Tat, who feature Muslim, Jewish and Christian subgroupings and who speak a divergent form of early-New Persian—a Southwestern Iranian language.

<sup>452</sup> This point needs to be qualified with an acknowledgement that the general regional trend is of ethnonationalist sentiment correlating *negatively* with religious devotion. Strangely enough, the Talysh on the Iranian side of the border are predominantly Sunni Muslim.

particularly susceptible to elite concerns in faraway Baku over purported Iranian subversion.<sup>453</sup>

The last non-religious area of soft power is Iran's contemporary image in the sphere of healthcare. The Republic of Azerbaijan's dysfunctional public healthcare system and narrow choice of overpriced private healthcare facilities make many Baku-Azerbaijani citizens more inclined to travel to Iran for more-affordable—and higher-quality—medical treatment.<sup>454</sup> While rather circumscribed as a life experience, a positive impression of an individual having had a health procedure done in a place like Tabriz and the reputational effect on friends and family back home can boost the image of contemporary Iran as a technologically-advanced country with a highly-qualified professional class in the eyes of Baku-Azerbaijanis as a whole. As a byproduct, it may make ordinary citizens of the Republic of Azerbaijan even more dissatisfied with the dysfunction and corruption prevalent in their public healthcare system. In the opposite direction, Baku tries to use its limited soft-power-projecting capacity *vis-à-vis* neighbouring Iran in health-related instances. An example would be Baku's past commitment, relayed to me by one of my interviewees, to facilitate the delivery of one million Covid vaccine doses to Iran.<sup>455</sup>

On the whole, in the reputational sphere, Iran is in most direct competition with Turkey. In their current forms of government and state ideologies, Turkey and Iran appeal to greater and lesser degrees to very different segments of the population of the Republic of Azerbaijan. This diversity disappears as one climbs up the socioeconomic

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<sup>453</sup> Interview with Dr Vasif Huseynov, Baku, 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 2021.

Sadegh-Zadeh, Kaweh. "Iran's Strategy in the South Caucasus". *Caucasus Review of International Affairs*, 2(1) 2008: 38.

<sup>454</sup> Interview with Anar Imanzade, Baku, 24<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

<sup>455</sup> Interview with Dr Samad Bayramzade, Baku, 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 2021.

and educational ladder, to the point where the near-entirety of the country's elite sees Turkey as uniquely aspirational and as the most logical country to remain closest geopolitical allies with.

## **Conclusion**

The immaterial connectivity linking both shores of the Aras is lopsided and misaligned, so to speak. By focusing on the intersubjective dimension of Baku-Azerbaijani elite views of their own national identity and history—which inevitably trickle down to the masses—and by speculating of ways in which the latter informs policy, this chapter shows how all of the above elements often clash with the intersubjective treatment of the very same topics by elites in Iran (and Iranian Azerbaijan, for that matter). This is not a major problem in itself, as for example debates over divergent interpretations of shared history are endemic to the region. The issue is nevertheless complicated by the irreconcilable goal of arguing for the legitimacy of the country within its contemporary borders, all while paying lip-service to the bulk of the country's 'titular nation' living outside the country. Focusing on Caucasian Albanians as 'ancestors of the Azerbaijanis', or on the semi-independent Khanates of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, implicitly excludes lands to the South of the Aras River. This tension reveals a complex relationship with Iran, a polity that Azerbaijan cannot fully dissociate from its own nationbuilding narratives, despite the elites' best efforts. Russia plays a role analogous to Iran: they are jointly the main reason why Azerbaijanis run a very low risk of having their national identity eroded by that of the Turkish Republic, despite the latter nation being clearly the most aspirational of the three.

Iran's soft power, especially in the religious realm, is a source of anxiety for the Baku elites, in ways analogous to Turkey- and Azerbaijan-inspired ethnonationalist foment in Iranian Azerbaijan conversely representing a major source of anxiety for the Tehran elites. It is nevertheless only in the Baku-Azerbaijani case where the bulk of the country's elite—especially those socialized in the Soviet period—pride themselves in living in what they deem a modern, secular, forward-looking, quasi-Western polity. The idea of younger people in the Republic of Azerbaijan becoming more consciously Shia Muslim fundamentally challenges this worldview, the aforementioned elites associating conservative Shia Islam with provincialism, backwardness and lower socioeconomic status, in addition to purportedly rendering the country more susceptible to Iranian meddling. Eight-or-so generations of politico-historical divergence between the two sides of the Aras have also rendered interaction with Iranian Azerbaijanis, once finally allowed again, more difficult than the intersubjective understanding in Baku of them 'being part of the same nation' would have predicted. Renewed person-to-person contacts in-part enabled by new transport links appear to have done little to close this divide. That being said, genuinely wishing for a 'reunification with Southern Azerbaijan' is a virtually non-existent sentiment among the interviewed elites. Real-life exposure to the political and social reality of contemporary Iran—and general disinterest of Iranian Azerbaijanis in Baku's cultural and political overtures—inspires down-to-earth pragmatism.

Baku-Azerbaijani elites frame Iran as an unavoidable factor in any of Baku's regional policy calculations. An approach of constant engagement with the Islamic Republic is therefore discursively framed as the most reasonable avenue. At times of a temporary increase of regional tensions, this discursive representation allows the

Republic of Azerbaijan to portray itself as the ‘eminently-reasonable’ actor. The latter *topos* is partly in opposition to the ‘wild-card’-role discursively ascribed to the Islamic Republic, somehow in spite of Baku elites admitting the latter’s inherent pragmatism. In addition to pursuing regional interdependence on Baku’s own terms, large-scale infrastructure projects and material connectivity more broadly—key building blocks of an economy diversified away from hydrocarbon extraction—allow for the aforementioned policy of unrelenting engagement of Iran to be filled by practical and technocratic concerns. Furthermore, this allows Baku to prioritize multilateralism over the bilateral Baku–Tehran format. Greater material connectivity is thus seen as a panacea to many of Azerbaijan’s problems, despite it potentially facilitating ‘undue influences’ of an immaterial-connectivity nature (and close ‘civilizational links’ with Iran are, after all, deemed a liability by the elites in Baku and their general propensity is to replicate the hegemonically-employed national discursive strategy of mitigation, i.e. to downplay the former immaterial connectivity). This would most notably be the case of a more pronounced Shia Muslim religious influence emanating from Iran, as would be the case of a greater awareness of kinship links, that could put the legitimacy of the contemporary southern border of the Republic of Azerbaijan into question, from either a pan-Turkic irredentist or ‘Iranian chauvinist’ direction.

## **Chapter 4—Republic of Uzbekistan Case Study: Elite Discourse on Iran– Uzbekistan Relations**

The choice of the Republic of Uzbekistan as the Central Asian empirical case study to complement the South Caucasian case study of Azerbaijan is not without controversy, nor without some felt need for further qualifications. During my short spring-2019 stay as a visiting researcher at the Russian Academy of Sciences' Oriental Institute in Moscow, I was met with scepticism insofar as having Uzbekistan as a stated case study and fieldwork-destination for the broader topic of Iran–Central Eurasia relations. Nominally Shia and until-some-nine-generations-ago-part-of-Iran Azerbaijan made perfect sense, while Uzbekistan, I am told, only has the tenuous historical and cultural commonality of 'traditionally sedentary' populations—juxtaposed here against the nomadic Kipchaks of the region, as well as the Turkmen—and 'some Persian-speaking minorities'. Tajikistan, by contrast, has the substantial cultural link of a Persian variety as the state language and national vernacular. Turkmenistan, while less obvious than Tajikistan, at least shares a land border with Iran, a relevant fact when looking at overland material connectivity.<sup>456</sup> This feedback would imply that, even after accounting for the outright impossibility of fieldwork in Turkmenistan and increasingly challenging conditions for researchers touching upon political issues in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan would still be a suboptimal choice. As I hope to demonstrate in this chapter, the latter claim was not vindicated.

Because of Uzbekistan's centrality within Central Asia, both in terms of geography and demographics, as well its ruling elite's overt ambitions of regional leadership, any attempt to examine Iran's overtures towards Central Asia, both in the

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<sup>456</sup> Kazakhstan shares a direct maritime link with Iran, via Caspian shipping routes—an additional quality Uzbekistan lacks.

spheres of material and immaterial connectivity, as well as in terms of local receptiveness (or lack thereof), will have Uzbekistan ‘pop up’ periodically as the common denominator. In fact, only Uzbekistan sits at the intersection of a Venn diagram for, on the one hand, ‘Iran’s main transport link interlocutors in Central Asia’, a role played most prominently by Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, and, on the other hand, ‘Iran’s main cultural interlocutor’, quintessentially embodied in the small mountainous Republic of Tajikistan.

Uzbekistan may well be somewhat deficient, by virtue of falling short of Tehran’s ‘main thrust’ of transport link initiatives and acknowledged immaterial links of ‘civilizational affinity’, but it is the sole Central Asian republic exposed to a unique—albeit less condensed and less overt—blend of both ‘the material’ and ‘the immaterial’ to comparable degrees. There is a case to be made that Iran—in its courting of newly-independent Tajikistan—managed to fill a lacuna initially left open by the preference of most players in the region (namely Russia, Turkey and the West) for Uzbekistan—the central player.<sup>457</sup> By contrast, some three decades later, all regional states are being engaged by a multiplicity of regional or global actors. As a Persian-speaking ‘outlier’ in post-Soviet Central Asia, the generalizability of Tajikistan–Iran relations as a case study to those between Iran and the other four republics (all Turkic by ethnolinguistic affiliation) would be more limited than in the case of the Uzbekistan–Iran dyad.

Nonetheless, not completely unlike Iran–Azerbaijan relations (as shown in the previous chapter), the Iran–Uzbekistan bilateral relationship can be considered the most fraught one in the entire Iran–Central Asia constellation. Compared to my experience

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<sup>457</sup> See Roy, Olivier. “Bohrān-e hoviyat-e mellī dar Tājīkestān” [The National Identity Crisis in Tajikistan]. *Moṭāle‘āt-e Āsiyā-ye Markazī va Qafqāz*, 5(13) 1996: 255-263.

with elite interlocutors in Baku, with every additional interviewee in Tashkent, it became nonetheless quickly clear that Iran is not nearly as present on the conceptual radar of Uzbekistan's elite as on that of those in the Republic of Azerbaijan.

On many more occasions of Iran being brought up in an interview question, discursive representations of the latter country's relations with Uzbekistan would tend to get filtered through the prism of the country's own regional role as would-be leader of Central Asia, rather than the relationships being tackled directly, in an unmediated manner. This filtering is henceforth a prominent thematic pattern of this empirical chapter, as is the conspicuous inclusion—employing a discursive strategy of assimilation—of Afghanistan in Uzbekistan's elite discourse on Central Asia. Another ubiquitous theme is Tashkent's preoccupation with 'omnibalancing'—referred to in Uzbekistan's elite discourse as maintenance of 'equidistant' relationships with regional and extra-regional powers alike—and actively preventing any single non-Central-Asian power from gaining a local hegemonic standing, as well as the related national drive to diversify the double-landlocked republic's export routes to an almost obsessive degree. Much like in the previous chapter, select instances of discursive omission, or even mere ignorance of specific events, are hypothesized here to carry analytical weight.

The structure of this chapter is the following: After briefly exploring elite discursive framing of historical relations between successive Iranian dynasties and local rulers in Transoxiana and the continued legacies of those relations, it explores a series of metanarratives discernible within the still-rather-hegemonic national elite discourse. The last section of this chapter looks at the new Eurasian overland links, or current early-stage projects thereof. It looks at the way the quality of 'being relevant to the Iran-Uzbekistan relationship' is discursively attributed to these instances of material



connectivity by a discursive means of predication. It also reveals the ways in which said infrastructure would occasionally call attention to the shared cultural capital (i.e. immaterial connectivity) between Iran and Uzbekistan, which is more substantial than with any other Turkic-speaking Central Asian republic, and which has been continually rediscovered and reframed over the course of the independence period.

## **I) Antecedents and historical legacies of ‘Iran–Turkestan’ relations**

### *A) Continuity and discontinuity*

Unlike the rough outline of Iranian plateau-based polities of the past half-millennium, the historical dynastic polities centred on Transoxiana virtually never coincided with the modern-day boundaries of any modern-day Central Asian territorial unit—the boundaries of which were delineated during the Moscow-led *razmeževanie* process of the 1920s. This applies as much to the Republic of Uzbekistan as to the other four republics. Claims of direct political and institutional continuity between dynastic rule in Transoxiana and the modern-day nation-state of Uzbekistan are consequently never made on the side of Uzbekistan’s elites, not even in case of the nationalized ‘Timurids’, nor of the modern nation’s Shaybanid Uzbek namesakes. This puts Tashkent’s case in stark contrast to the analogous discourse in Baku. Instead, more cautious assertions would be made of more diffuse elements of continuity confined to the cultural realm, including facets of local political culture. One interlocutor would enumerate ways in which Turco-Mongol nomadic steppe empires had left a lasting imprint in features of ‘Eurasian’ governance, in ways relevant to modern-day Uzbekistan, including high degrees of centralization and the tendency of the political centre to siphon off the

resources of the periphery.<sup>458</sup> Because of the undeniable institutional continuity between Soviet rule and the independence period, this would imply that the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union had inherited key features of Turco-Mongol nomadic steppe culture to the same extent as more intuitively-obvious modern political power-centres in Inner Asia.

In a monograph given to me for additional context as a gift by an academic interviewee, the nature of contemporary economic relations cultivated by countries like Turkey and Iran with post-Soviet Central Asia is discursively juxtaposed against prior centuries of said sub-regions existing—in spite of periodic political fragmentation—as one coherent civilizational and economic space.<sup>459</sup> The implicit *topoi* evoked in the latter discursive juxtaposition are that of artificial ‘disruption’ ushered in by decades of autarkic Soviet rule and one of an ‘ongoing rectification’ of past market distortions and cultural ‘sealing off’. This discursive framing aligns well with the intersubjective understanding on the Iranian side of the equation (see pages 90-91).

In terms of ‘civilizational affinity’, some care is given to create an idea of ‘equidistance’ of Turkey and Iran *vis-à-vis* Uzbekistan and Central Asia more broadly. This is discursively accentuated by Dr Yuldasheva bemoaning the fact that, despite a similar syncretic inheritance of Turkic and Persianate cultural and linguistic components, Baku-Azerbaijanis—referred to by the predicative discursive shorthand of ‘*naši Azerbaïdžantsy*’, explored more in-depth on pages 144-145—are said to neurotically downplay their civilizational affinity with Iran and accentuate the one they

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<sup>458</sup> Interview with Dr Nuryoghdi Toshov, Tashkent, 25th of April 2022.

<sup>459</sup> Yuldasheva, Guli. *Geopolitičeskie protsessy v sovremennoï tsentral'noi Azii: Iran i SŠA* [Geopolitical Processes in Contemporary Central Asia: Iran and the US]. Latvian Institute of International Affairs, Riga. 2017: 222.

share with Turkey.<sup>460</sup> This could plausibly constitute a discursive instance of nomination (i.e. of singling out), more concretely by alluding to Baku's supposed failure to maintain analogous equidistance.

The aforementioned attitudes in Baku seem to nevertheless at least partially resonate with Uzbekistan's former ambassador to Iran, now academic, Abdusamat Khaydarov. This would be the case at least insofar as Turkey's secular political model is constructed, by the discursive means of predication, as 'more compatible' with the political system of post-Soviet Uzbekistan, though Turkey's inherent advantage over Iran—in terms of either country's relations with Uzbekistan—is also discursively attributed to Turkic linguistic affinities. This advantage would be nevertheless also immediately discursively downplayed—via a strategy of relativization—by the very same interviewee's high expectations of Iran's imminent full accession into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The latter is something Turkey is precluded from seeking, due to its NATO membership.<sup>461</sup>

#### *B) Pre-modern Iran–Turkestan relations*

From a broader historical perspective, due to the sheer constraints of geography, the Republic of Turkey's predecessor—the Ottoman Empire—could scarcely maintain as close political, economic and cultural interactions with Turkestan in the early modern period as would Safavid and Qajar Iran. A key takeaway from interviews touching upon historical ties between polities of the Iranian plateau and those of Transoxiana has been in discerning the use of a discursive means of predication, namely the attribution of greater relevance to more recent dynastic polities, even if that consequently meant

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<sup>460</sup> Interview with Dr Guli Yuldasheva, Tashkent, 6<sup>th</sup> of May 2022.

<sup>461</sup> Interview with Professor Dr Abdusamat Khaydarov, Tashkent, 28<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

witnessing a more complex overview of historical interactions between Turkestan and Iran at times of greater political fragmentation of the former. For most of the aforementioned past half-millennium, the portions of Central Asia inhabited by settled populations had been divided between rival Turco-Mongol dynastic polities, generally centred on Khorezm and on the Zarafshan river basin (as well as, somewhat later, also the Fergana Valley) respectively.

By nature of my main historian interlocutor's academic research background, the case study of Iran–Turkestan relations offered to me is that of Safavid-then-Qajar-Iran's relations with the Khanate of Khiva. It nonetheless needs to be said that Safavid Iran's main northeastern adversary had been the Bukharan polity under the Abu'l-Khayrid Shaybanids, not Khorezm. This was most notably the case under Shah Ismail I and Muhammad Shaybani, during a series of wars the marked the first decade of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when Khorezm was briefly part of the Khanate of Bukhara, as well as during Abbas the Great's Khorasan campaigns a century later. The insights on historical Iran–Khiva relations were no less valuable, especially since my Uzbekistani interlocutor would make sure to highlight whenever her insight departed from 'mainstream' national historiography. Dr Allaeva also points out the overall paucity of more recent scholarship on Iran's relations with the polities of Central Asia south of the *Dašt-i Qipčāq* (referred to as *Mā-warā'-an-nahr*—the Arabic term for Transoxiana—in earlier periods, and 'Turkestan' in later periods), a slight exception being some recently-published work on the relations between Qajar Iran and the Emirate of Bukhara. Mainstream historiography in Uzbekistan addressing the broader relations from the Safavid era onwards is plagued, I am told, by an overly simplistic and ahistorical understanding of an ostensibly-unsurmountable Shia-Sunni antagonism, a dichotomizing discursive

tool.<sup>462</sup> The presumably-Soviet-era *topos* of sectarian division of West-Central Asia having supposedly precipitated a lasting divergence is mirrored by the intellectual justification—spearheaded by Bukhara-Emirate-born Sadriddin Ayni—of deeming Tajiki a language distinct from Iranian Persian.<sup>463</sup> The political expediency of this historiographical *topos* in the Soviet era would be in distancing the settled Muslim populations of Central Asia from their cultural and linguistic counterparts of the other side of the USSR–Iran border.

Instead of replicating and perpetuating this highly reified historical understanding, Dr Allaeva proposes a *topos* of fundamentally pragmatic historical relations between Iranians and the Khivans, driven by economic interests and *Realpolitik* and therefore largely-unobstructed by denominational difference. Given that, more often than not, Khiva finds itself under threat by the comparatively-more-powerful Bukharan polity, alliances between Khorezm and Safavid-era and early-Qajar-era Iran abound. One example highlighted would be the political alliance sealed by the marriage of Safavid Shah Tahmasp I to Khivan princess Aisha Begi Khanum. Similarly, heirs to the Khivan throne would occasionally seek refuge in the Safavid court in Isfahan, either in the context of Bukharan military campaigns against Khorezm, or of internal strife.<sup>464</sup>

It takes some two more centuries for Khiva to start abandoning Persian as its administrative language in favour of Chagatai Turkic, while Bukharan written sources suggest the polity's continuation of favouring Persian and Chagatai in roughly equal measure, all the way until the then-protectorate's incorporation into Bolshevik Russia in

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<sup>462</sup> Interview with Dr Nigora Allaeva, Tashkent, 5<sup>th</sup> of May 2022.

<sup>463</sup> Khalid, Adeeb. *Making Uzbekistan: Nation, Empire, and Revolution in the Early USSR*. Cornell University Press, 2015: Chapter 7 - Tajik as a Residual Category: 305-311.

Hulstine, Matthew. "Where Persian Ends and Tajik Begins: Sadriddin Ayni and Language Reform in Early Soviet Tajikistan". Masters' Thesis for Indiana University, September 2019.

<sup>464</sup> Interview with Dr Nigora Allaeva, Tashkent, 5<sup>th</sup> of May 2022.

1920.<sup>465</sup> The notion of the entire wider area having been part of the same contiguous civilizational sphere—one where syncretic Turco-Iranian cultural references were immediately legible to elites of either one of the aforementioned polities—clearly comes across to me as an intended audience.

*C) Diasporic factor of 'Eroniy' Shias*

A contentious issue of the broader historical subject of Iran–Turkestan relations has been the slave economy, based overwhelmingly on the capture and enslavement of Shia Iranians. Dr Allaeva would suggest that Khiva's 'comparatively milder' slaveholding practices would be generally confined to the domestic realm and would not, unlike expansionist Bukhara's, constitute the backbone of the local economy. In both instances, the capture and sale of subjects of the shah of Iran to Khorezm and Bukhara would be implemented by nomadic Turkmen intermediaries, with the general pattern being of Astarabadis captured and sold to Khiva by Yomut Turkmen and Khorasani Shias (likely both Persian and Khorasani-Turkic-speaking) being raided by the Teke Turkmen and sold to the Bukharans.

Dr Allaeva, in her displayed propensity to downplay any negative role of the Khivans (clearly not due to any form of Khorezmi regional patriotism, as she is originally from Termez, on the opposite end of the country), discursively shifts the bulk of blame, attributing all instances of slave mistreatment squarely on the Turkmen intermediaries.<sup>466</sup> A conspicuous element, which partially corroborates the aforementioned Soviet-era *topos* of the 'unsurmountable Shia-Sunni divide', are the religious justifications in Bukhara of enslaving Shia Iranians, as the latter demographic

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<sup>465</sup> Interview with Dr Nigora Allaeva, Tashkent, 5<sup>th</sup> of May 2022.

<sup>466</sup> Interview with Dr Nigora Allaeva, Tashkent, 5<sup>th</sup> of May 2022.

is deemed, rather conveniently, under the late-18<sup>th</sup> century Manghit emir Shah Murad, ‘not real Muslims’ and thus a legitimate target of *ḡazwa*.<sup>467</sup> Dr Allaeva delves somewhat into the political economy of this burgeoning slave economy, associating its increase and the religious justification for it with the disruption of lucrative traditional overland trade-routes in Eurasia.<sup>468</sup> The single largest instance of such forced displacement had been the direct capture and population transfer of the Persian inhabitants of the Merv oasis to Bukhara and Samarqand by Shah Murad’s forces in the late 1700s, accompanied by an attempt at their forced conversion to the *Ḥanafī* Sunni *madḥab*.<sup>469</sup> Apparently similar religious zeal was wielded against Bukhara’s Khivan rivals, as they were deemed ‘bad Muslims’, albeit not outright *kufarā*. The hidden legacy of Khivan slaveholding of Iranian Shias, pointed out to me by Dr Allaeva, is the Qul (‘slave’ in Common Turkic) sub-ethnicity—never officially recognized by the Soviets, nor by the Uzbek authorities—within contemporary Khorezm. The interviewee’s research would stumble on the life story of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Khivan vizier Makhtum, himself a freed slave of Iranian origins, who would set out to liberate fellow enslaved Iranians. The Qul are nominally Sunni Muslim Khorezmi-Oghuz-Uzbek-speaking communities which still nonetheless uphold some vestigial elements of Twelver Shia religious and cultural practice.<sup>470</sup>

A more immediately-evident legacy of historical interactions between 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Iran and the Turkestani dynastic polities—one still affecting Iran–Uzbekistan relations to various degrees—is the ‘Eroniy’ (from the eastern Persian

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<sup>467</sup> This episode seems to mirror an earlier series of historical events, this time to Iran’s opposite—i.e. western—flank. Some quarter-of-a-millennium earlier, Ottoman religious scholars designate the ascendant Safavid Qizilbash variously as heretics or infidels and therefore legitimate targets for *ḡazwa*.

<sup>468</sup> Interview with Dr Nigora Allaeva, Tashkent, 5<sup>th</sup> of May 2022.

<sup>469</sup> Von Kugelgen, Anke. “Manghits”. *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 2004. URL: [iranicaonline.org/articles/manghits](http://iranicaonline.org/articles/manghits)

<sup>470</sup> Interview with Dr Nigora Allaeva, Tashkent, 5<sup>th</sup> of May 2022.

rendering *Ērānī* of the adjective ‘Iranian’) community of Samarqand and Bukhara. Unlike their Qul counterparts in Khiva and Urgench, Eronis<sup>471</sup> are defined by their preserved—undoubtedly due to their larger numbers—Twelver Shia religious affiliation. Furthermore, not all trace their ancestry back to late-18<sup>th</sup> and early-to-mid-19<sup>th</sup> century slave trade, suggesting also a non-coerced trickle of Iranian tradesmen into Turkestan, presumably somewhat later. The ‘pacification’ of Turkmen tribes by Imperial Russia and joint pressure by Russia and Qajar Iran on Khiva and Bukhara in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century ultimately put an end to slavery in the region<sup>472</sup>—a phenomenon that targeted not only Iranian Shias, but also, albeit to a much lesser extent, Russians from the imperial frontier.

Native language is not a relevant feature for the Eroniy identity. In Samarqand, a plurality of Eronis use their own sociolect of Uzbek at home.<sup>473</sup> This would be a result—I speculate—of a substantial percentage of Shia Khorasani Turks among those Iranians originally displaced to Samarqand; a demographic factor which would have surely facilitated the relatively straightforward linguistic shift from Oghuz Turkic to Karluk Turkic. In Bukhara, by contrast, the Eronis generally all speak Tajiki Persian.<sup>474</sup> Despite facing assimilationist pressures analogous to those experienced by Uzbekistan’s Tajiks since the early Soviet era, exemplified in the informal expectation either group tick ‘Uzbek’ in the national census,<sup>475</sup> there had traditionally been no particular affinity

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<sup>471</sup> In Russian, the ethnonym was relayed to me in Tashkent as *Iranets* (plural *Irantsy*), so the literal translation of the Uzbek *Eroniy* in English is simply ‘Iranian’. However the latter is not the scholarly convention and would likely introduce too much ambiguity in English.

<sup>472</sup> Interview with Dr Nigora Allaeva, Tashkent, 5<sup>th</sup> of May 2022.

<sup>473</sup> Interview with Samarqandi Eroniy student, Tashkent, April 2022.

<sup>474</sup> Germanov, Valery A. “Shiite-Sunni Conflict of 1910 in the Bukhara Khanate”, Higher School of Economics, 2007: 120.

<sup>475</sup> Kadyrbaev, A. Sh. “Uzbeki – kto oni? K voprosu ob ètničeskoj istorii” [The Uzbeks – Who are they? To the issue of ethnic history]. *Iran-Namè*, (11) 2009: 115.



between the Sunni Tajiks and the Shia Eronis.<sup>476</sup> In fact, there had been a well-attested instance of large-scale communal violence between Sunnis and Shias in Bukhara that transpired in 1910.<sup>477</sup> The start of the aforementioned pogrom is attributed to the Sunni-majority perception that the Shia minority had been unfairly benefiting from disproportional amounts of lucrative economic niches and administrative positions in the Emirate.<sup>478</sup>

The already-alluded-to commonality Eronis share with the Tajik population is that their numbers in Uzbekistan are also likely grossly underestimated. The last census held in Uzbekistan to at least give respondents the option to tick ‘Eroniy’ was the 1989 Soviet one. In the latter, some 25,000 chose to declare their affiliation.<sup>479</sup> This is in stark contrast with an informal upper estimates of the number of Eronis in Samarqand alone, such as the one relayed by former ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the Republic of Uzbekistan Mohsen Pakaein—placed at some 100,000—during his tenure in the late 1990s.<sup>480</sup> In the same diplomatic memoir, the Iranian official is surprised to find out that his counterpart Erkin Khodjaev, Uzbekistan’s ambassador in Tehran at the time, is an Eroniy from Samarqand,<sup>481</sup> consistent with the anecdotal track record of the aforementioned group ‘punching above their weight’. The Iranian ambassador’s self-

<sup>476</sup> Finke, Peter; Sancak, Meltem. “To Be an Uzbek or Not to Be a Tajik? Ethnicity and Locality in the Bukhara Oasis”. *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, 137(1) 2012: 65.

<sup>477</sup> In his writings, Sadriiddin Ayni suggested these communal riots had an anti-Persian-speaker undercurrent, but the obvious nationalistically-motivated reasoning here should encourage the reader to take these claims with a pinch of salt.

<sup>478</sup> Alexeev, Anton K. “Shia-Sunni Interactions in Greater Central Asia: Retrospective and Current States”. Moscow, Higher School of Economics, 2014: 9. URL: [www.hse.ru/data/2014/11/26/1101761106/75HUM2014.pdf](http://www.hse.ru/data/2014/11/26/1101761106/75HUM2014.pdf)

See Germanov, Valery A. “Shiite-Sunni Conflict of 1910 in the Bukhara Khanate”, Higher School of Economics, 2007

<sup>479</sup> “Uzbekistan: Ethnic Iranian Shias Face Legal Troubles in Bukhara”. *EurasiaNet*. Aug 30, 2017. URL: [eurasianet.org/uzbekistan-ethnic-iranian-shias-face-legal-troubles-in-bukhara](http://eurasianet.org/uzbekistan-ethnic-iranian-shias-face-legal-troubles-in-bukhara)

<sup>480</sup> Pakaein, Mohsen. *Čahār sāl dar Sarzamīn-e Teymūr: Hāṡerāt-e safīr-e sābeq-e Īrān dar Ozbakestān (1374-1378)* [Four Years in the Land of Tamerlane: Recollections of Iran’s Former Ambassador to Uzbekistan (~1995-1999)] Oral History Unit, Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS) Tehran, 2010: 48.

<sup>481</sup> Ibid., 25.

admitted track record nonetheless shows a surprising number of round trips between Tashkent to Samarqand. The official agenda of the visits consisted of meetings with local Shia Eroniy representatives and overseeing the Iran-funded rebuilding of the central Shia mosque in the main Eroniy *mahalla*.<sup>482</sup>

It is this context that gives some credence to Nuryoghdi Toshov's relaying perceptions of parts of Uzbekistan's elites that, for much of the 1990s, Tehran sought to leverage the purported receptiveness of Uzbekistan's Shias to Iran's cultural and political messaging. The overall character of these rumoured activities would be qualified, by means of the discursive instrument of predication, as 'subversive' in nature.<sup>483</sup> While not specially addressing the veracity of these rumours, former ambassador Khaydarov tells me that the *topos* of Eronis being either a 'fifth column', or at least being amenable to do Tehran's bidding—a popular speculation, I am told, made in Western analytical scholarship—is a wholly unsubstantiated one.<sup>484</sup>

#### *D) Alignment and misalignment of historical understanding*

When it comes to existing scholarship on broader regional issues pertaining to Iran–Turkestan historical relations and education on the latter, elite interviewees bemoan the poor historical understanding the general populace has of 'the other' on both sides of the former-Soviet border. Dr Allaeva would point out history textbooks in Iran that erroneously extrapolate historical territorial losses cemented in the Gulistan and Turkmenchay treaties to Central Asia, ahistorically postulating that the bulk of the heavily-populated oases of Turkestan had been ceded to Imperial Russia by the weak

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<sup>482</sup> See Ibid.

<sup>483</sup> Interview with Dr Nuryoghdi Toshov, Tashkent, 25<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

<sup>484</sup> Interview with Professor Dr Abdusamat Khaydarov, Tashkent, 28<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

and disinterested Qajars.<sup>485</sup> My interlocutor's explanation for this deficit of historical understanding, which she chooses to refrain from judging too harshly, is the lamentable legacy of what was effectively the West-Central Asian counterpart to the Iron Curtain. She suggested more interstate-level efforts be made in the areas of culture and education between the Islamic Republic and the Republic of Uzbekistan, so that a more accurate, concerted interpretation of regional history can be offered in secondary education. This lag is discursively juxtaposed against some heartening developments in the scholarly output of universities of the wider region. My historian interviewee would commend recent excellent research carried out by a doctoral researcher in Iran on the Abu'l-Khayrid Shaybanids.<sup>486</sup> On the 'Uzbek side', Toshov would recommend a worthwhile piece of scholarly work claiming an emboldening effect the 1979 Revolution in Iran ostensibly had on segments (presumably more nationalistically-minded) of the population of Soviet Uzbekistan.<sup>487</sup>

Given that Uzbekistan is separated from Iran by Turkmenistan—the only post-Soviet Central Asian republic to share a land border with Iran—and given that there is no Uzbek diasporic community in Iran, it should come as no surprise that Uzbekistan's elites do not discursively replicate anything resembling the aforementioned Baku-Azerbaijani *topos* of 'ayrılıq' (separation). In the more analogous situation of being aware of the presence of a substantial Uzbek-speaking minority in Northern Afghanistan, there is still nothing that comes close to the Azerbaijani notion of 'unjust historical division'. The cause for this is likely the consciously-embraced state-centric model of nationhood that culminated under Karimov—replicating a 19<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>485</sup> This could be attributable to a misreading of mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century Qajar claims—largely unenforceable, due to them being wholly outside of the shahs' control, due to Turkmen raiding—to large swathes of the territory corresponding to modern-day Turkmenistan (see Figure n.1).

<sup>486</sup> Interview with Dr Nigora Allaeva, Tashkent, 5<sup>th</sup> of May 2022.

<sup>487</sup> Interview with Dr Nuryoghdi Toshov, Tashkent, 25<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

French, heavily-assimilationist, paradigm. The only regional model that in any way resembles the Baku-Azerbaijani one in terms of diasporic links is the one embraced in Tajikistan, and only really *vis-à-vis* the ‘unfairly-lost Tajiki-speaking cities’ of Samarqand and Bukhara. ‘Territorially-satisfied’ and ‘pro-regional-*status-quo*’ Iran has no reason to echo the latter sentiments in official discourse, save for a desire for language rights of Persian speakers in Uzbekistan being respected.

Interestingly, a denominational link straddling post-Soviet Central Asia and the Middle East highlighted by one of my interviewees in her gifted authored monograph is the possible spread of Shia-Sunni sectarian animosity from the Middle East to Central Asia—more specifically Uzbekistan and Tajikistan—with the possible outcome of victimization of their own respective Twelver Shia Eroniy and Pamiri Ismaili minorities respectively.<sup>488</sup> This highlighted danger has—likely to everybody’s relief—not come to fruition even after the repatriation of detained *Dā’iś* combatants from Syria back to Central Asia. The last point pertaining to Tashkent elite discursive strategies pertaining to history and historical legacies is the juxtaposition made by the very same member of Uzbekistan’s Academy of Science. On the one hand, there is the still-fresh historical memory of the territorial losses formalized by the treaties of Gulistan and Turkmenchay harboured by the bulk of university-educated Iranians and by extension producing distrust *vis-à-vis* modern Russia. On the other hand, the current Raisi administration, consisting of hardliner ‘principlists’, sees close relations with Russia as an existential imperative.<sup>489</sup>

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<sup>488</sup> Yuldasheva, Guli. *Geopolitičeskie protsessy v sovremennoï tsentral’noï Azii: Iran i SŠA* [Geopolitical Processes in Contemporary Central Asia: Iran and the US]. Latvian Institute of International Affairs, Riga. 2017: 232

<sup>489</sup> Interview with Dr Guli Yuldasheva, Tashkent, 6<sup>th</sup> of May 2022.

## II) Metanarratives and overarching framing devices deployed in Tashkent

### A) 'Iran–Turan'

One of the more stark linguistic tools employed in service of 'meta-level' discursive strategies by an elite interlocutor has been a *topos*—one employed already in the Iranian primary sources discussed in the overview chapter—of a reified Iran–Turan dichotomy. While the Iranian authors would deploy this deeply culturally-resonant imagery with clear poetic license,<sup>490</sup> my elite Uzbek interlocutor would default to the idea of the mythical Iran–Turan rivalry in a much more sober fashion, presented as ingrained in the republic's popular and elite sensibilities and as having a bearing on Tashkent's relationship with Tehran to this very day.<sup>491</sup> The somewhat fatalistic notion of Iranians being the eternal 'proximate-other' (as opposed to a 'distant-other', such as the United States) and of the mythical polity of Turan being wholly conflated with the more recent, albeit still historical in nature, coherent geographical unit of Turkestan deserve more attention here. As I explain in the second chapter, without a 'Turanian polity' to define oneself in opposition to, the very idea of Iran as something corresponding to an actual relevant-at-the-time territory has been fraught for much of Iranian history.<sup>492</sup> Correspondingly, the idea of elites ruling over a territorial unit identifying with the Shahnameh's main territorially-defined antagonists has historical precedent, most prominently with the mediaeval designation of *Āl-i Afrāsīyāb* for the Karakhanid realms

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<sup>490</sup> See the framing of Iran's former deputy Foreign Minister's Maleki, Abbas. "Iran and Turan: A Proposal of Iran's Relation with Central Asia and Caucasus Republics". *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, 11(5) 2001.

<sup>491</sup> Interview with official at Uzbekistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Tashkent, April 2022. See such prosaic (non-poetic, non-mythical) use of the Iran–Turan dyad discursively deployed also in Mamajonov, Otabekmirzo. "On Uzbek-Afghan Cultural Relations". in Ismailova, Gulnoza S.; Khasanov, Ulugbek A. (Eds.) *Modern Central Asia: Resilience and Capacity Building*. Tashkent, University of World Economics and Diplomacy (UWED), Kent, GCRF COMPASS, Print Edition. 2021: 278.

<sup>492</sup> De Blois, François, "The Concept of Iran in Zoroastrian and Other Traditions". The 19th Kutar Memorial Lecture, SOAS, London 21 April 2016. URL: [www.academia.edu/28561291/The\\_concept\\_of\\_Iran\\_in\\_Zoroastrian\\_and\\_other\\_traditions](http://www.academia.edu/28561291/The_concept_of_Iran_in_Zoroastrian_and_other_traditions)

of Transoxiana and the southwestern Tarim Basin.<sup>493</sup> In contemporary Uzbekistan, while clearly not done to brandish the legitimizing force of cultural imagery borrowed from the stanzas of the *Shahnameh*, the name Afrosiyob features proudly—to the astonishment of Iranian visitors—<sup>494</sup> in placenames and in the commercial branding of state-funded material connectivity initiatives. A particularly-noticeable example of the latter is the name of the train rolling stock operating on the high-speed rail line between Tashkent and Samarqand, more recently extended to Bukhara and further afield.<sup>495</sup>

This discursive assimilation, on a diffuse meta-level, conflating Uzbekistan with Turan does not remotely imply an identification with pan-Turanism or pan-Turkism. Said identification is instead territorially bounded to the historico-cultural entity of Turkestan.<sup>496</sup> In the Uzbek context and discursive practices, this would tend to coincide with post-Soviet Central Asia and (at least parts of) non-post-Soviet Afghanistan, but would outright exclude the ethnolinguistically-closest-kin of Xinjiang<sup>497</sup> in deference to Beijing’s sovereignty over the latter and in recognition of geopolitical realities. It is nevertheless inclusive of the parts of post-Soviet Central Asia inhabited by non-Turkic peoples such as the Tajiks,<sup>498</sup> dismissing potential objections that may emanate from

<sup>493</sup> Vászary, István. “Two Patterns of Acculturation to Islam: The Qarakhanids versus the Ghaznavids and Seljuqs”. in Herzig, Edmund; Stewart, Sarah (Eds.) *The Age of the Seljuqs*, London, 2014: 20.

<sup>494</sup> Pakaein, Mohsen. *Čahār sāl dar Sarzamīn-e Teymūr: Hāterāt-e safīr-e sābeq-e Irān dar Ozbakestān* (1374-1378) [Four Years in the Land of Tamerlane: Recollections of Iran’s Former Ambassador to Uzbekistan (~1995-1999)] Oral History Unit, Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS) Tehran, 2010: 186-187.

<sup>495</sup> “Prezidentimiz Buxoro – Urganch – Xiva Temir Yo‘lini elektrolashtirish loyihasi bilan tanishdi” [Our President got acquainted with the Bukhara–Urgench–Khiva railway line electrification project]. *Temiryo‘lchi gazetasi*, 47(6423) December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022: 1-2. URL: [www.railway.uz/uz/informatsionnaya\\_sluzhba/newspaper-archive/930/?VOICE=N](http://www.railway.uz/uz/informatsionnaya_sluzhba/newspaper-archive/930/?VOICE=N)

<sup>496</sup> Safoev, Sodyq S. “Central Asia at the Crossroads”. in Safoev, Sodyq S.; Khasanov, Ulugbek A. (Eds.) *Modern Central Asia: Regional Connectivity & Capacity Building*. University of World Economics & Diplomacy (UWED). 2022: 11.

<sup>497</sup> Interview with Dr Nuryoghdi Toshov, Tashkent, 25<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

<sup>498</sup> Mamajonov, Otabekmirzo. “On Uzbek-Afghan Cultural Relations”. in Ismailova, Gulnoza S.; Khasanov, Ulugbek A. (Eds.) *Modern Central Asia: Resilience and Capacity Building*. Tashkent, University of World Economics and Diplomacy (UWED), Kent, GCRF COMPASS, Print Edition. 2021: 279.

Dushanbe to these often-unstated regional-leadership ambitions of Tashkent.<sup>499</sup> The intellectual roots of such an understanding of Uzbekistan as the ‘leading vanguard’ of Central Asia in the political, cultural and intellectual arenas date back—in its pre-*razmeževanie* iteration of neo-Chagatai-speaking-elite-led Central Asia—to the *Jadid* movement of the early-20<sup>th</sup> century, more specifically to the inception of the pan-Turkism-sceptical Turkestani branch of this intellectual programme.<sup>500</sup>

*B) Uzbekistan’s self-professed leadership role in Central Asia*

In common foreign-policy practice, this implies that foreign-policymaking elites in Tashkent would colour this intersubjective view of those regional relations that transcend the sub-region—not least Tashkent’s relations with Tehran—with the aforementioned notion of Uzbekistan’s regional leadership within Central Asia. Elite discourse on Uzbekistan–Iran relations is correspondingly produced and understood through a prism of regional relations entertained between Iran and a Central Asia, with Uzbekistan as the latter’s ‘natural core’. This regional discursive prism, at least in the post-Karimov era, has the quantity of being ‘fundamentally cooperative’ discursively

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Mukarramova, Zilola. “Uzbekistan-Tajikistan Relations: Past and Present”. in Ismailova, Gulnoza S.; Khasanov, Ulugbek A. (Eds.) *Modern Central Asia: Resilience and Capacity Building*. Tashkent, University of World Economics and Diplomacy (UWED), Kent, GCRF COMPASS, Print Edition. 2021: 285-295.

<sup>499</sup> This also solidifies the major takeaway of my interviews that, in Tashkent, New Persian—in its various forms—in not perceived as a phenomenon inherently tied to the Iranian plateau, or the Iranian state. While, for decades, a popular Uzbek mischaracterization has been in place discursively portraying Tajiks as either ‘Persianized Uzbeks’, or—in case of the bulk of Tajiki-speaking Uzbekistanis—as newcomers, displaced from Tajikistan over the course of the civil war in the 1990s, all of the elites interviewed knew better, in that respect.

As an example of trying to set the record straight, see Mukarramova, Zilola. “Uzbekistan-Tajikistan Relations: Past and Present”. in Ismailova, Gulnoza S.; Khasanov, Ulugbek A. (Eds.) *Modern Central Asia: Resilience and Capacity Building*. Tashkent, University of World Economics and Diplomacy (UWED), Kent, GCRF COMPASS, Print Edition. 2021: 287.

<sup>500</sup> Edgar, Adrienne Lynn. “Review of Roy, Olivier, *The New Central Asia: The Creation of Nations*, and Geiss, Paul Gerog. *Nationenwerdung in Mittelasien*”. *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 3(1) 2002: 186-187.

See Khalid, Adeeb. *Making Uzbekistan: Nation, Empire, and Revolution in the Early USSR*. Cornell University Press, 2015.

See Khalid, Adeeb. *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia*. University of California Press. Berkeley/Los Angeles/Oxford, 1998.

ascribed to it. This is a trend Dr Yuldasheva identifies with Tashkent's foreign policy based on omnibalancing (described by the latter scholar as '*strategiya konstruktivnogo ravnoudalennogo partnerstva s mirovymi derzhavami*', a 'strategy of constructive equidistant partnership with world powers') on the transregional level.<sup>501</sup>

This sets the geopolitical reality of Uzbekistan in stark contrast with the 'zero-sum' quality predicatively ascribed by one interviewed Tashkent-based scholar to the regional predicament of the Republic of Azerbaijan.<sup>502</sup> If one entertains the central premise of critical theory that knowledge production and power are intrinsically intertwined it should come as no surprise that—as was pointed out to me by Dr Farkhod Tolipov—it was specifically the Republic of Uzbekistan that took the initiative and provided government funding and physical premises in the national capital for the new International Institute of Central Asia (IICA). Tashkent's growing regional leadership ambitions also manifest in Uzbekistan's sustained efforts to 'erode' Turkmenistan's rigid neutrality, perhaps allowing for some concessions and some partial involvement of the latter in regionalist schemes.<sup>503</sup>

The elephant in the room is nonetheless still the Uzbekistan–Russia relationship. After all, two Central Asian republics—Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan—are deeply involved in the Russia-dominated Eurasian Economic Union. Furthermore, both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan's economies are propped up by migrant labour remittances from Russia, with two of the highest remittance-to-GDP ratios—of approximately one-

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501 Yuldasheva, Guli. *Geopolitičeskie protsessy v sovremennoĭ tsentral'noĭ Azii: Iran i SŠA* [Geopolitical Processes in Contemporary Central Asia: Iran and the US]. Latvian Institute of International Affairs, Riga. 2017: 224-225.

<sup>502</sup> Interview with Dr Farkhod Tolipov, Tashkent, 27<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

<sup>503</sup> Interview with Dr Farkhod Tolipov, Tashkent, 27<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.



third—on the planet, second only to the island microstate of Tonga.<sup>504</sup> Under Karimov, Russia would generally be kept ‘at an arm’s length’, yet at the time of my fieldwork, Dr Tolipov expressed concern over current-President Mirziyoyev’s flirting with the idea of Uzbekistan applying for Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) membership.<sup>505</sup> This evidently does not gel with the notion of Uzbekistan being at the helm of Central Asian regionalism. The republic’s leadership in Tashkent has exhibited, ever since independence in 1991, the propensity to only ever sign up to any large-scale regional infrastructure project or regional cooperation scheme if that meant counter-balancing a would-be external hegemon.<sup>506</sup> That being said, the entire period between my spring 2022 fieldwork and the autumn of 2023 was marked by vacillations of the rhetoric by the leadership in Tashkent on that specific issue. Mixed messaging by public officials and internal disagreements are said to have led to the resignation of then-foreign minister, Uzbekistan’s foreign-policy-veteran Abdulaziz Kamilov.<sup>507</sup>

An additional factor undermining the grounding for Uzbekistan elite’s discursively framing their republic as the cornerstone of the sub-region of Central Asia, in ways that are relevant for the Iran–Uzbekistan relationship is the underwhelming use of Uzbekistan’s territory in Central Asian freight shipments. In the mid-2010s, the relative volume of regional freight shipments using Uzbekistan’s territory was only 11%, low even in relative terms *vis-à-vis* the country’s 18% share of Central Asia’s total

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<sup>504</sup> “Personal remittances, received (% of GDP)”. *The World Bank*. 2021. URL: [data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS)

<sup>505</sup> Interview with Dr Farkhod Tolipov, Tashkent, 27<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

<sup>506</sup> Yuldasheva, Guli. *Geopolitičeskie protsessy v sovremennoï tsentral’noï Azii: Iran i SŠA* [Geopolitical Processes in Contemporary Central Asia: Iran and the US]. Latvian Institute of International Affairs, Riga. 2017: 221.

<sup>507</sup> Interview with Dr Farkhod Tolipov, Tashkent, 27<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

regional rail network.<sup>508</sup> With the only two extant rail links between Central Asia and China being located in Kazakhstan and the sole two rail links connecting Central Asia with Iran being located in Turkmenistan, there is an incentive for these two republics to respectively monopolize east–west and north–south Central Asian freight transit at the expense of Uzbekistan. Khasanov and Nurmetova point out this unique vulnerability of Uzbekistan. The republic is particularly susceptible to being simply avoided as a transit country, as had already occurred when the increasingly-inadequate Soviet-era rail junction located in Uzbekistan’s autonomous region of Karakalpakstan got simply circumvented by Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan.<sup>509</sup> Competing transport routes are thus discursively framed as wielding the potential to erode Uzbekistan’s regional standing.<sup>510</sup> This is where the strategic importance of the planned China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan rail link, discussed in the subsequent chapter section dedicated to Iran–Uzbekistan connectivity, comes into play.

### *C) Maintaining ‘equidistance’*

The third metanarrative pertaining to elite discursive framing of Uzbekistan’s relations with Iran—following the productive ‘Iran–Turan conceptual dichotomy’ and the republic’s espoused ‘central role in Central Asia’ colouring its relations with extra-regional powers—is the related discourse on seeking ‘equidistance’ (in practice implying a strategy of omnibalancing, taken from the IR balance of power theory) *vis-à-vis* major regional and global powers. To delineate what constitutes Uzbekistan’s own

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<sup>508</sup> Yuldasheva, Guli. *Geopolitičeskie protsessy v sovremennoï tsentral’noï Azii: Iran i SŠA* [Geopolitical Processes in Contemporary Central Asia: Iran and the US]. Latvian Institute of International Affairs, Riga. 2017: 209.

<sup>509</sup> Khasanov, Ulugbek; Nurmetova, Mavluda. “Growing Potential of Central Asian Trade Logistics”. *GCRF Compass Policy Brief*, 15 February 2022: 5-6.

<sup>510</sup> Yuldasheva, Guli. *Geopolitičeskie protsessy v sovremennoï tsentral’noï Azii: Iran i SŠA* [Geopolitical Processes in Contemporary Central Asia: Iran and the US]. Latvian Institute of International Affairs, Riga. 2017: 228.

region, Dr Ulugbek Khasanov describes, utilizing concepts from Regional Security Complex theory,<sup>511</sup> the five post-Soviet Central Asian republics and Afghanistan jointly as constituents of ‘an autonomous regional sub-complex within the broader Eurasian regional security complex’.<sup>512</sup> The delineation of the latter greater regional complex can be argued to be, at least in part, reinforced by regional schemes such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The latter criterion would now place the Islamic Republic of Iran in the same regional macro-complex as Central Asia, but not in the latter’s own autonomous sub-complex. The latter delineation would also potentially facilitate the inclusion of South Asia into the greater Eurasian complex.

It is at this juncture that Tashkent’s ambivalence about the perceived geopolitical, economic and cultural proximity of Iran gets accentuated by the metanarrative of ‘equidistance’ *vis-à-vis* both the Middle East and South Asia, and correspondingly also *vis-à-vis* select major players located in these respective regions. In practice, this also implies an imperative to engage in omnibalancing between said powers. For some time now, Uzbekistan has actively sought to create closer relations with India and Pakistan, which would facilitate the convergence of Central Asia and South Asia, via the ‘region-straddling’ country of Afghanistan. Altogether this was to be done in alignment with the broader policy imperative of renewing ties, following the collapse of the USSR, with historically-and-culturally-linked territories of Eurasia. In practice, the latter were identified with the modern-day polities of Turkey, Iran, Pakistan and India.<sup>513</sup> With the goal of Afghanistan’s stabilization in mind, the quasi-

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<sup>511</sup> See Buzan, Barry; Wæver, Ole. *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*. Cambridge University Press, 2003.

<sup>512</sup> Interview with Dr Ulugbek Khasanov, Tashkent, 29<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

<sup>513</sup> Khasanov, Ulugbek; Nurmetova, Mavluda. “Growing Potential of Central Asian Trade Logistics”. *GCRF Compass Policy Brief*, 15 February 2022: 5.  
Interview with Dr Ulugbek Khasanov, Tashkent, 29<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

integration of Central and South Asia had also been the goal of Washington throughout the 2010s, with the most prominent examples being the ‘New Silk Road’ initiative—not to be confused with the former title of China’s ‘Belt and Road Initiative’—and the associated TAPI (‘Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India’) gas pipeline project, as well the currently-under-construction CASA-1000 electric power transmission line. On the whole, my interlocutor evaluates these American integrative efforts, via the discursive tool of predication, as a failure.<sup>514</sup>

The regional powers mentioned the most frequently in the metanarrative framework of Tashkent’s strategic imperative to ‘maintain equidistance’ have been Russia, China, Iran and Turkey. That said, the same imperatives are at play equally *vis-à-vis* world powers such as the United States. Alongside preventing any single player from attaining hegemony in Central Asia and further diluting Uzbekistan’s own sub-regional leadership role, the preservation of sovereignty is discursively attributed as the main motivating factor for Uzbekistan’s ‘omnibalancing’. Similarly, multilateral regional frameworks not centred on Central Asia are seen with inherent scepticism in Tashkent, as Uzbekistan’s leadership could not plausibly envisage a pooling of said sovereignty—a red line for the republic’s leadership.<sup>515</sup> Iran, Turkey and Russia, by virtue of being all relegated to an ostensibly-equidistant footing *vis-à-vis* Uzbekistan, can also be played against one another. Dr Yuldasheva would suggest that any improvement of a constituent bilateral relationship within the Russia–Turkey–Iran triad leads to a deterioration of relations with the neglected third party. It is nevertheless only with a concerted engagement with all of the three big regional players that

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<sup>514</sup> Yuldasheva, Guli. *Geopolitičeskie protsessy v sovremennoj tsentral’noj Azii: Iran i SŠA* [Geopolitical Processes in Contemporary Central Asia: Iran and the US]. Latvian Institute of International Affairs, Riga. 2017: 154

<sup>515</sup> Khaydarov, Abdusamat A.; Mirkasymov, Surat M. “Uzbek Perspectives on Eurasia”. *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs*, 75(1) 2019: 95.

Uzbekistan—and Central Asia more broadly—can achieve lasting prosperity and regional connectivity within Eurasia.<sup>516</sup> On a more granular level, Turkey is discursively predicated to have an inherent advantage over Iran by virtue of the ethno-linguistic Turkic connection and due to Turkey's secular republican model being more compatible with that of post-Soviet Central Eurasia,<sup>517</sup> something already discussed previously.

In the specific area of deep historical and religious ties (i.e. immaterial connectivity), Turkey and Iran wield an advantage even over the Russian Federation. Aside from the former two having been offering a clear alternative export route (i.e. material connectivity) to those solidified by decades of Soviet centralization and proliferation of Moscow-centred transport links, the 'civilizational' ties with the adjacent Muslim-majority regional powers appear categorically distinct from the ties with fellow post-Soviet republics further afield, such as Russia, Moldova, or Ukraine. This factor of deeper affinity that predates Russian rule further qualifies the meta-level notion of 'equidistancing'. In the realm of this older-dating quasi-Islamic affinity, regional players such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia nevertheless carry the stigma of being associated with perceived support—at various recent historical junctures—of Jihadi terrorism. Consequently, unlike Tehran and Ankara, Islamabad and Riyadh are discursively framed as lacking in policy pragmatism due to ideological commitments.<sup>518</sup>

The same Academy of Sciences interlocutor is nonetheless also able to put herself in the shoes of Iran's foreign-policy leadership, insofar as she identifies with Tehran's desire, since the 1990s, to 'reintegrate' those swathes of the Muslim world that

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<sup>516</sup> Yuldasheva, Guli. *Geopolitičeskie protsessy v sovremennoĭ tsentral'noĭ Azii: Iran i SŠA* [Geopolitical Processes in Contemporary Central Asia: Iran and the US]. Latvian Institute of International Affairs, Riga. 2017: 230.

<sup>517</sup> Interview with Professor Dr Abdusamat Khaydarov, Tashkent, 28<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

<sup>518</sup> Yuldasheva, Guli. *Geopolitičeskie protsessy v sovremennoĭ tsentral'noĭ Azii: Iran i SŠA* [Geopolitical Processes in Contemporary Central Asia: Iran and the US]. Latvian Institute of International Affairs, Riga. 2017: 159, 213, 223-225.

were once sealed off by the Cold War ‘following a shared historical Middle Eastern-Central Asian territorial logic’. Uzbekistan, in turn, can evidently benefit from a southern ‘open seas’ export route that is more predictable and secure than those that would traverse Afghanistan. Paradoxically, US-imposed anti-Iranian sanctions may actually accelerate this quasi-integration, as it leaves Tehran with few other options than seeking geographically-closer economic partners and carry out virtually-undetectable-by-Washington’s-extraterritorial-sanctions-regime cross-border economic transactions in Iran’s immediate vicinity.<sup>519</sup> In summary, in an increasingly China-dominated—in terms of trade—and still Russia-led, albeit decreasingly—in terms of collective security—Eurasia, Tashkent’s policy of seeking ‘equidistant partnerships’ benefits the economically and geopolitically weaker regional players, most notably Iran.

#### *D) Decades of overcoming distrust*

Another meta-level *topos* in elite discourse pertaining to Iran–Uzbekistan relations is that of ‘overcoming distrust’. At the inception of Central Eurasia’s independence from Moscow, Iran was perceived—for a relatively brief initial period—as a revolutionary, fundamentally revisionist and ideologically-driven Islamist interlocutor. It would be only over the course of multiple regional crises that Tehran had proved itself to not actually be this way, at least in terms of its ‘northern neighbourhood policy vector’. Among my interlocutors, there was nevertheless some variation within the degree to which they would discursively attribute the predicative qualities of ‘pragmatism’ and ‘an overall constructive regional approach’ to the Islamic Republic. Rather than this being ostensibly a result of a fuller understanding of one’s interlocutor over time, ex-ambassador Khaydarov would associate Iran’s seeming departure from ideology in its

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<sup>519</sup> Ibid., 31, 162, 187.

policy *vis-à-vis* post-Soviet Central Asia to personal changes in leadership within the ruling apparatus—more specifically the particular pragmatic vision of then-President Hashemi-Rafsanjani—as well as a semi-official abandonment of the idea that Iran’s revolutionary model can be exported abroad. The latter gave way to more ‘watered down’ and diffuse lip-service to ‘Islamic solidarity’, with pragmatism ultimately reaching an apogee during the presidency of Khatami, whose foreign policy had been conducted ostensibly under the banner of the ‘Dialogue of Civilizations’. The ex-ambassador highlights how the latter principle of Iran’s foreign policy was first formulated—at least as far as international venues are concerned—on the premises of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in 1998.<sup>520</sup>

i) Reducing distrust by joint management of regional crises

Uzbekistan’s former ambassador to Iran also pushes back against any uncomplicated notion—such as that put forward by then-Iranian-ambassador to Uzbekistan Mohsen Pakaein<sup>521</sup>—that the internal military conflicts in Tajikistan and Afghanistan brought Tashkent and Tehran closer together in an uncomplicated manner, effectively working as a confidence-building measure. Iran’s role in the civil war in Tajikistan is—by the discursive means of predication—assessed as a net-negative, despite Professor Dr Khaydarov also conceding that joint Russo-Iranian efforts (with only some auxiliary involvement by Uzbekistan) got the opposite warring parties in Tajikistan to the negotiating table. Dr Khaydarov instead chooses to focus on Iranian support provided to the United Tajik Opposition, especially Sunni militants of the Islamic Party of

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<sup>520</sup> Interview with Professor Dr Abdusamat Khaydarov, Tashkent, 28<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

<sup>521</sup> See Pakaein, Mohsen. *Čahār sāl dar Sarzamīn-e Teymūr: Hāterāt-e safīr-e sābeq-e Īrān dar Ozbakestān (1374-1378)* [Four Years in the Land of Tamerlane: Recollections of Iran’s Former Ambassador to Uzbekistan (~1995-1999)] Oral History Unit, Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS) Tehran, 2010.

Tajikistan, at the onset of the conflict, as well as to speculate about Iran's role in the consolidation of the widely-despised Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.<sup>522</sup>

Conversely, there is a conspicuous omission in my Tashkent interview responses of any mention of alignment of interests between Tashkent and Tehran over their joint support of the Northern Alliance following the fall of Kabul in 1996, despite this being a major theme and discursive takeaway of the aforementioned Pakaein's diplomatic memoir.<sup>523</sup> The latter point admittedly glosses over some major prior divisions between Iran and Uzbekistan *vis-à-vis* Afghanistan at the time. The former would, after all, support the Rabbani government and commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, while the latter would support the ethnically-Uzbek commander Dōstum. The latter warlord also sought to prevent Tajik civil war refugees in territory under his control from setting up United Tajik Opposition training camps,<sup>524</sup> in apparent alignment with Uzbekistan's interests.

In curious contrast to little attention given to the Afghanistan crisis of the 1990s, the current ongoing crisis in Afghanistan—and the alignment between Tehran and Tashkent in the context of that agenda—was a major constituent feature of the discursive framing of Iran–Uzbekistan relations in Tashkent. This would also corroborate, over the course of the three-or-so decades of bilateral relations, the *topos* of 'overcoming distrust' on Uzbekistan's side. The alignment on Afghanistan is in terms of pressuring the Taliban government to respect the language rights of the country's ethnolinguistic minorities, with Tashkent keen on seeing Afghanistan's Uzbeks

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<sup>522</sup> Interview with Professor Dr Abdusamat Khaydarov, Tashkent, 28<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

<sup>523</sup> See Pakaein, Mohsen. *Čahār sāl dar Sarzamīn-e Teymūr: Ḥāṭerāt-e safīr-e sābeq-e Īrān dar Ozbakestān (1374-1378)* [Four Years in the Land of Tamerlane: Recollections of Iran's Former Ambassador to Uzbekistan (~1995-1999)] Oral History Unit, Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS) Tehran, 2010.

<sup>524</sup> Koolae (cited here as 'Koolaie'), Elaheh. "Security Links of Afghanistan and Tajikistan". *Amu Darya: The Iranian Journal of Central Asian Studies*, 6(13) 2002/2003: 398.



culturally thriving, and Tehran wanting the same for the multiple Persian speaking groups.<sup>525</sup> Within the latter category, Iranian decisionmakers also seek to ensure a reasonably peaceful *modus vivendi* between the ruling Taliban and the Hazara Shia Muslims. Uzbekistan's elite similarly seek girls' education to continue under the Taliban, especially in the northern provinces of the country. Lastly, Tehran and Tashkent's interest align on seeking to ensure that Afghanistan's territory is never used by third parties as a base of attack against Iran, nor against Uzbekistan.<sup>526</sup>

While not hosting refugee populations from Afghanistan in numbers that would be remotely comparable to Iran or Pakistan, one of my elite interlocutors in Uzbekistan emphasized the need for Tashkent to assist with the repatriation of the most recent refugee wave of citizens of Afghanistan and to reverse the ongoing brain drain. This would also be accompanied with the continuation of technical training programmes for citizens of Afghanistan in Uzbekistan's border city of Termez.<sup>527</sup> Beyond merely an alignment of the geopolitical and security interests of Iran and Uzbekistan, Dr Khaydarov also points out some temporary alignment of interests between the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the European Union following the Taliban takeover of the summer of 2021.<sup>528</sup>

An additional meta-level discursive-strategy-perpetuating tool, namely the *topos* of 'successful overcoming of distrust', is the realization that Iran's foreign-policy establishment does not correspond to a single clear centre of decisionmaking. Dr Khaydarov pointed out to me how the Islamic Republic's policy towards the post-Soviet space is hardly ever formulated by Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Since the main

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<sup>525</sup> Interview with Dr Guli Yuldasheva, Tashkent, 6<sup>th</sup> of May 2022.

<sup>526</sup> Interview with Professor Dr Abdusamat Khaydarov, Tashkent, 28<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

<sup>527</sup> Interview with Dr Guli Yuldasheva, Tashkent, 6<sup>th</sup> of May 2022.

<sup>528</sup> Interview with Professor Dr Abdusamat Khaydarov, Tashkent, 28<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

instrument of Iran's foreign policy since the mid-2000s is discursively predicated by Dr Khaydarov to be its own cultural 'soft power', there has been a further proliferation of autonomous actors. Aside from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its rather limited manoeuvring space, this includes also the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting ( '*Ṣedā-o-sīmā*' ), the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, and various charitable foundations—most notably the *Bonyād-e Mostaża'fān*.<sup>529</sup>

The diplomat-turned-academic also pointed out the noticeable presence of high-level officials of the previous presidential administration on social media, with a million Twitter followers of former Foreign Affairs Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and some 800,000 followers of ex-President Rouhani.<sup>530</sup> In spite of all of this soft power messaging and despite three decades of overcoming distrust, I am told that the bulk of Uzbekistan's political elites still prefer to 'keep the Islamic Republic at an arm's length'.<sup>531</sup> The only other interviewee affiliated with the National Academy of Sciences seeks, yet again, to put herself into the shoes of Iranian decisionmakers and asserts that Tehran has likely still not forgiven Tashkent for having had 'joined the bandwagon' of US-led economic sanctions targeting Iran back in the mid-1990s.<sup>532</sup>

## ii) Reducing distrust by coexisting in multilateral fora

The last key feature of the 'overcoming distrust' metanarrative is the key role of multilateral regional formats in engaging both Iran and Uzbekistan. A conspicuous omission in my interviews had been the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), never addressed or brought up unprompted, this likely suggesting the organization is

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<sup>529</sup> Interestingly, the *Bonyād-e Sa'dī* was not brought up.

Interview with Professor Dr Abdusamat Khaydarov, Tashkent, 28<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

<sup>530</sup> Interview with Professor Dr Abdusamat Khaydarov, Tashkent, 28<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

<sup>531</sup> Interview with Dr Nuryoghdi Toshov, Tashkent, 25<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

<sup>532</sup> Interview with Dr Guli Yuldasheva, Tashkent, 6<sup>th</sup> of May 2022.

hardly ever an actual topic featured on the conceptual radar of Uzbekistan's elites. The multilateral frameworks continually brought up by my interlocutors was the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), as well as, albeit admittedly to a much lesser extent, the Eurasian Economic Union. Dr Khaydarov was rather ready to accept assertions that Iran's SCO accession process had been put on hold for some time, ostensibly on grounds of Tajikistan's voiced opposition.<sup>533</sup> The idea that regional powers such as Russia and China could not *de facto* override Tajikistan's veto, should they feel the need to do so, nevertheless comes across as unconvincing.

I also found little evidence over the course of my Tashkent fieldwork that any of Uzbekistan's elites in the post-Karimov era still see Iran–Tajikistan relations to be an inverse function of the Iran–Uzbekistan relationship, something previously exemplified by a major diplomatic spat between Tehran and Tashkent over Tajikistan's *Sangtūda-2* hydroelectric project in late-2010 (see pages 63-64).<sup>534</sup> Until there is a 'final status' agreement regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute, an analogous disbanding of the Iran–Armenia–Azerbaijan 'drama triangle' is unlikely to take place. Dr Khaydarov suggests that Iran–Azerbaijan relations are more analogous to the Iran–Tajikistan relationship than the Iran–Uzbekistan one, by virtue of there being similarly-deep immaterial links. Relying on a discursive means of juxtaposition, he suggests that—in case of the South Caucasus—those links would centre on the strong Shia denominational pull factor. Conversely, in the case of Tajikistan, it is clearly the linguistic factor that is central, to the extent of even partially mitigating the 'Shia-Sunni misalignment'. Another variable paradoxically favouring close Iran–Tajikistan ties has

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<sup>533</sup> Interview with Professor Dr Abdusamat Khaydarov, Tashkent, 28<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

<sup>534</sup> Chaudet, Didier. "Perceived and Real Threats Coming from the South: The Impact of Iran and of the AfPak Region on Post-Soviet Central Asian Security". *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 14(3) 2012: 348.

been the latter republic's extreme underdevelopment. Even more modest Iranian financial investment in the transport and energy sectors in Tajikistan will consequently make a noticeable impact.<sup>535</sup>

By the time of my fieldwork, most of the underlying Iran–Tajikistan tension—which had presumably been used as a pretext by Russia and China to refrain from extending an offer of full SCO membership to the Islamic Republic—had admittedly been overcome. Subsequent interviews clarified the question why would Uzbekistan's elites be this invested in Iran's imminent SCO accession. Firstly, for the sake of Tashkent's omnibalancing, an Iran as full-member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and—with any luck, as Uzbekistan's elites see it—unburdened from unilaterally-reimposed US sanctions would help reverse the trend of the SCO becoming even more of a 'Russia-and-China-dominated regional club'. The latter dual hegemony would also make it difficult for Uzbekistan to develop closer economic ties with South Asia and Europe.

India and Pakistan's also still relatively recent SCO accession had seemingly been helping balance—from the vantage point of Tashkent—Uzbekistan's regional interests, as exemplified by the highly-mediatised spring 2022 lorry convoy departing from Mumbai and ending in Tashkent, via Karachi, Kabul and Termez. Resorting to a discursive micro-strategy of trivialization, Dr Tolipov would predicatively ascribe the qualifier of a 'mere publicity stunt' to said freight convoy. It was likely accomplished only thanks to, I am told, the invested parties having had paid a one-off bribe to local warlords and militants in Afghanistan in exchange for safe passage.<sup>536</sup> Iran's greater

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<sup>535</sup> Interview with Professor Dr Abdusamat Khaydarov, Tashkent, 28<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

<sup>536</sup> Interview with Dr Guli Yuldasheva, Tashkent, 6<sup>th</sup> of May 2022.

Interview with Dr Farkhod Tolipov, Tashkent, 27<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

participation in multilateral regional fora also has the added externality—in addition to facilitating closer Iran–Uzbekistan ties—of creating new geoeconomic ‘facts on the ground’ in the region, a new reality that the United States cannot afford to object to, lest they alienate Washington’s Central Asian partners.<sup>537</sup> While, at the time of writing, the prospect of Uzbekistan’s accession into the Eurasian Economic Union seems still very unclear, both Iran and Uzbekistan have signed free trade agreements with the EAEU, in the case of the former an agreement spearheaded by the former Iranian ambassador to Moscow Mehdi Sanaei.<sup>538</sup>

#### *E) Iran’s aspirational dimension in Tashkent*

The penultimate meta-level discursive framing of Iran–Uzbekistan relations are endogenous ideas of ‘cultural proximity’ and ‘modernity’. A central thread of my interview with Dr Guli Yuldasheva had been the idea that clear hierarchies pertaining to cultural proximity—as seen from the vantage point of Tashkent—are in place, as well as aspirational elements of portions of Iranian society ‘having achieved modernity’ in ‘unmediated ways’. While increasingly a central economic partner, it was made clear to me that China is seen in Uzbekistan as far-removed and arcane, both culturally and institutionally-speaking. In comparison, developing closer relations with other Muslim-majority countries, primarily Turkey and Iran, is seen as being in the strategic interests of the Republic of Uzbekistan.<sup>539</sup>

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<sup>537</sup> Yuldasheva, Guli. *Geopolitičeskie protsessy v sovremennoï tsentral’noï Azii: Iran i SŠA* [Geopolitical Processes in Contemporary Central Asia: Iran and the US]. Latvian Institute of International Affairs, Riga. 2017: 196.

<sup>538</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>539</sup> Interview with Dr Guli Yuldasheva, Tashkent, 6<sup>th</sup> of May 2022.

Yuldasheva, Guli. *Geopolitičeskie protsessy v sovremennoï tsentral’noï Azii: Iran i SŠA* [Geopolitical Processes in Contemporary Central Asia: Iran and the US]. Latvian Institute of International Affairs, Riga. 2017: 213.

When it comes to engaging with Iranian elite interlocutors, Dr Yuldasheva makes it clear that Uzbekistan nationals are culturally at complete ease and that there is a mutual understanding of ‘civilizational kinship’. This would contrast, for example, with the Kazakhs. Kazakhstan currently has much more institutional and interpersonal cooperation with Iran underway—especially in the academic sphere—yet Kazakhs reportedly lack the organic familiarity with ‘Iranian ways’ inherent to the Uzbeks. This can mean navigating social interactions, as well as engaging with shared ‘Persianate’ cultural references. Despite being nominally Muslim, these educated Kazakhs would largely be deprived of the aforementioned feeling of mutual kinship.<sup>540</sup> By implication, Uzbek elites would be a natural mediator between Iran and Kazakhstan, as they would be equally at ease with a context involving Iranian interlocutors, as well as ‘Mankurtized’<sup>541</sup> Kazakh and Kyrgyz interlocutors and their formerly-nomadic culture. It is not clear from my interview what would be the cultural standing of, say, educated Turkmen interlocutors. On the whole, Dr Yuldasheva would deem Uzbekistan the second Central Asian republic with the most shared ‘cultural capital’ with Iran, right behind Persophone Tajikistan. Interestingly, she cites the lingering ‘Soviet mindset’ on the Central Asian side of the equation to represent a greater cultural barrier than the more historically-salient ‘Shia-Sunni divide’.<sup>542</sup>

The other discernible constitutive meta-level element is that of modernity and associated gender considerations. The qualifier predicatively deployed the most when discussing the topic has been ‘*yevropeizirovannye*’ (literally meaning ‘Europeanized’, in

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<sup>540</sup> Interview with Dr Guli Yuldasheva, Tashkent, 6<sup>th</sup> of May 2022.

<sup>541</sup> The *topos* of the Mankurt, an enslaved Kipchak captive of the Dzungar enemy, induced to forget his own family and homeland by means an elaborate torture method inflicted by the latter, was coined by the Soviet Kyrgyz novelist Chingiz Aytmatov in his 1980 novel *I dol'she veka dliiyatsya den'* (The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years) as a metaphor for the Central Asians of the USSR who turn their back on their identity and heritage.

<sup>542</sup> Interview with Dr Guli Yuldasheva, Tashkent, 6<sup>th</sup> of May 2022.

the sense of ‘Westernized’), thematically confined to Dr Yuldasheva’s way of describing her prior Iranian interlocutors. While this may come as potentially counterintuitive in the context of the Islamic Republic, the academic would insist that the bulk of educated Iranians are more ‘modern’, ‘secular’ and ‘Westernized’ than their counterparts in Uzbekistan, not least on matters specific to women.<sup>543</sup> An important distinguishing feature is the acknowledgement that Central Asians had been confronted with Western modernity largely through Russian and Soviet-Russian mediation. Conversely Iranian elites, from very early on, would acquire their foreign university degrees in Western Europe or North America, Rouhani’s cabinet members being a case in point. Central Asian elites thus apparently still lack an ‘unmediated’ modernization experience.<sup>544</sup> A part of this realization was sustained by personal anecdotes, such as that of Dr Yuldasheva visiting a Samaqandi Eroniy colleague married to an Iranian citizen, who now resides in Tehran. Their lifestyle would be discursively predicated by the researcher as ‘being remarkably Western’.<sup>545</sup>

Compared to Uzbekistan, educated Iranians are represented in the discourse as wielding the ‘number-one asset’ of ‘considerable mobility’, securing a subsequent influx of foreign technical know-how, should at least a part of highly-skilled Iranian nationals return home.<sup>546</sup> Turkey was cited as a temporary destination for a bulk of these migration flows and Dr Yuldasheva did partially concede—after some minor pushback—that those educated Iranians who are drawn to seek further professional

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<sup>543</sup> For an excellent illustration of this phenomenon as it manifests in terms of gender issues, see Kandiyoti, Deniz. “The Politics of Gender and the Soviet Paradox: Neither Colonized, Nor Modern?” *Central Asian Survey*, 26(4) 2007: 601-623.

<sup>544</sup> Interview with Dr Guli Yuldasheva, Tashkent, 6<sup>th</sup> of May 2022.

<sup>545</sup> Interestingly, the amount of female (former) researchers or research assistants at the Academy of Sciences in Tashkent pointed out to me to be married to foreign nationals of non-post-Soviet Muslim-majority countries (aside from Iran, this was also the case of Pakistan and Afghanistan) was noticeable, in stark contrast to my Baku-Azerbaijani fieldwork experience.

<sup>546</sup> Interview with Dr Guli Yuldasheva, Tashkent, 6<sup>th</sup> of May 2022.

qualifications in Turkey may not be wholly representative of Iranians on whole, as the former tend to consist disproportionately of admirers of the secular and still-somewhat-pluralistic political model of the Turkish Republic. This is why it was particularly puzzling for me to hear Dr Yuldasheva discursively ascribe aspirational qualities to Iranian society from the Uzbek elite vantage point. More than the population of Uzbekistan, Iranian society is framed as successfully combining elements of both the ‘East’, as well as of the ‘West’. The *sui generis* model of the Islamic Republic reportedly introduces some degree of electoral unpredictability and a meaningful alternation of political factions at the helm of the legislative and executive branches. Independently of the political elite, the cultural and academic elite—and the relatively-young, university-educated population of Iran more broadly—is deemed to be pro-Western, or at least to possess ‘Westernized’ leanings.<sup>547</sup>

In parts of the interview, Dr Yuldasheva would communicate her surprise upon having witnessed circumscribed street protests, tolerated by the security forces, by university students in Iran.<sup>548</sup> Together with the ‘relatively pluralistic mass media ecosystem’, as well as an ‘abundance of adversarial journalism’, this ostensibly makes Iranian society more familiar with Western democratic norms than Central Asian post-Soviet societies. The ‘flipside’ of this is that Uzbekistanis, who could only aspire to such a degree of pluralism, are socialized to be more law-abiding, tend to get more public financial support, should they seek an academic career path, and are held more

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<sup>547</sup> Yuldasheva, Guli. *Geopolitičeskie protsessy v sovremennoĭ tsentral'noĭ Azii: Iran i SŠA* [Geopolitical Processes in Contemporary Central Asia: Iran and the US]. Latvian Institute of International Affairs, Riga. 2017: 30.

<sup>548</sup> The same interviewee suggests the latter has little chance of devolving into open contestation of the country’s leadership or constitutional order, as the still-close historical memory of the downsides of revolution and regime change ‘inoculates’ Iranians against desiring the latter, consequently favouring ‘evolution’ over ‘revolution’. It is curious to juxtapose this assertion against the more recent mass street protests in the wake of the death of Mahsa ‘Jina’ Amini in September of 2022.



publicly accountable in matters of private economic activity. Conversely, the downsides of the ‘pluralistic foment’ in Iranian society consist of poor organization of the state bureaucracy and the education system. Additional examples include an opaque and poorly-organized private sector and labour workforce in Iran, and a consequent lack of societal accountability. ‘Shady businessmen’ thrive in such an ecosystem, which then also informs the image of Iranian ‘would-be investors’ abroad, not least in places such as post-Soviet Central Asia. The aftershock, in Tajikistan, of the arrest of Iranian billionaire Babak Zanjani and the subsequent diplomatic spat between Tehran and Dushanbe had been a case in point.<sup>549</sup>

*F) Iran’s ‘unmet potential’*

The very last meta-level *topos* pertaining to elite discourse in Tashkent that tackles the topic of Iran–Uzbekistan relations is that of Iran being an economic ‘sleeping giant’ that perpetually ‘fails to meet its true potential’. The causes for this are invariably adverse geopolitical conditions, US-led sanctions targeting Iran’s economy, as well as internal mismanagement. The windfall from Iran becoming a regional economic powerhouse—a scenario deemed plausible in light of the country’s large, relatively-young and highly-educated population and its massive hydrocarbon reserves—would be considerable for Iran’s neighbourhood, Uzbekistan included. Dr Khasanov suggests that Turkey’s considerable economic role in the region has already plateaued, while Iran has been, so far, held back by the aforementioned exogenous and endogenous factors. It thus still has much space to grow further.<sup>550</sup> Dr Yuldasheva is even more optimistic, suggesting that the economic weight within Central Asia of an Iran completely freed from international

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<sup>549</sup> Interview with Dr Guli Yuldasheva, Tashkent, 6<sup>th</sup> of May 2022.

Trilling, David. “Tajikistan Distances Itself from Blacklisted Iranian Businessman”. *EurasiaNet*. January 3, 2014. URL: [eurasianet.org/tajikistan-distances-itself-from-blacklisted-iranian-businessman](http://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-distances-itself-from-blacklisted-iranian-businessman)

<sup>550</sup> Interview with Dr Ulugbek Khasanov, Tashkent, 29<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

sanctions could be in the same league as China's, anticipating fruitful competition between the two.<sup>551</sup> I would consider the latter prediction farfetched and rather implausible, yet it is a useful illustration of high hopes among Uzbekistan's elite placed on their country diversifying its main economic partners.

Iran and Russia are increasingly seen as being 'in the same boat' in terms of having their economic influence in Central Asia curbed by international sanctions regimes. While Dr Khasanov asserts that Uzbekistan's economy is resilient and largely unaffected by the new sanctions regime that the West imposed on Russia following the latter's early-2022 invasion of the Ukrainian 'mainland',<sup>552</sup> Dr Yuldasheva bemoans—already in her 2017 book—the combined adverse economic effects of a 'pincer' of sanctions targeting Russia (at the time merely those linked to the 2014 events in Ukraine) and of those targeting Iran on Central Asian economies.<sup>553</sup>

In some contexts, said sanctions are deemed to influence Tashkent decisionmakers in favouring alternative export routes, as is ostensibly the case in the acceleration of the consolidation of the east–west Eurasian connectivity along the lines of the so-called 'Middle Corridor'. This multi-modal corridor hinges on a trans-Caspian shipping link connecting Kazakhstan (and, to a much lesser extent, Turkmenistan) with the Republic of Azerbaijan in a way that circumvents both Russian and Iranian territory.<sup>554</sup> It is thus not inconceivable that even temporary setbacks, such as the unilaterally-reimposed US sanctions targeting Iran's economy, can lead to permanent

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<sup>551</sup> Yuldasheva, Guli. *Geopolitičeskie protsessy v sovremennoĭ tsentral'noĭ Azii: Iran i SŠA* [Geopolitical Processes in Contemporary Central Asia: Iran and the US]. Latvian Institute of International Affairs, Riga. 2017: 158.

<sup>552</sup> Interview with Dr Ulugbek Khasanov, Tashkent, 29<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

<sup>553</sup> Yuldasheva, Guli. *Geopolitičeskie protsessy v sovremennoĭ tsentral'noĭ Azii: Iran i SŠA* [Geopolitical Processes in Contemporary Central Asia: Iran and the US]. Latvian Institute of International Affairs, Riga. 2017: 154.

<sup>554</sup> Interview with Dr Ulugbek Khasanov, Tashkent, 29<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

economic and transport reorientations that irrevocably weaken Iran's future economic potential in places such as Central Eurasia. This would cast doubt on the entire meta-level *topos* of Iran being a 'latent source of endless economic potential' for the region. Continuing US sanctions, which have been shown to discourage energy connectivity projects that include Iran more effectively than doing the same for freight transport links, are shown to intensify Iran's political and economic relations with both Russia and China, thus undermining the very strategic goals they are ostensibly trying to achieve.<sup>555</sup>

### III) The interplay of material and immaterial connectivity in Iran–Uzbekistan relations

#### A) '*Bender-Abbas*'

Aside from the aforementioned meta-level *topos* of 'Iran–Turan rivalry', the other readily-brought-up notion, one strongly resonant with the 'geopolitical imaginary' of decisionmakers in Tashkent, is that of '*Bender-Abbas*'—the Russian-language rendering of the name of Iran's main port-city, located on the Strait of Hormuz.<sup>556</sup> Since shortly after the independence of the Central Asian republics—as far as road transport on lorries is concerned—and since 1996—for freight moved over rail—crucial cash crops such as cotton no longer have to be exported to world markets through the territory of the Russian Federation. Instead, the shortest and most economically viable export outlet for goods from the landlocked Central Asian republics is the Persian Gulf

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<sup>555</sup> Yuldasheva, Guli. *Geopolitičeskie protsessy v sovremennoĭ tsentral'noĭ Azii: Iran i SŠA* [Geopolitical Processes in Contemporary Central Asia: Iran and the US]. Latvian Institute of International Affairs, Riga. 2017: 84-85.

<sup>556</sup> Interview with official at Uzbekistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Tashkent, April 2022. This is to remind the reader that my Tashkent interviews were all conducted in Russian.

and other adjacent inlets of the Indian Ocean. Dr Khaydarov relays the ceremonial opening, in mid-1996, of the Mashhad–Sarakhs–Tejen rail link which connected Iran’s and post-Soviet Central Asia’s respective rail networks for the first time in history, an event attended by heads of state and high-level officials of a dozen countries of the region.<sup>557</sup> Besides discursively attributing credit to Uzbekistan-based construction companies involved in the project, the former ambassador and deputy foreign minister also uses a discursive frame of this transport link as a ‘game-changer’, a fundamental enhancer of Uzbekistan’s sovereignty. After all, the material link dramatically decreased the republic’s economic dependency on Russia.<sup>558</sup>

A conspicuous omission in this context was Dr Khaydarov’s discursive framing glossing over the coordinating institutional role of the Economic Cooperation Organization in this major milestone.<sup>559</sup> It admittedly also needs to be said the idea itself has been officially formulated already as part of an Irano-Soviet agreement signed in the summer of 1987, but the plan had been shelved due to the economic difficulties that would go on to precipitate the collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>560</sup> The Mashhad–Sarakhs–Tejen link also meant a renewal of Iran’s rail connectivity with post-Soviet Central Eurasia *tout court*, since the historic link across the Aras River in Julfa effectively became ‘rail tracks to nowhere’ ever since the Karabakh war broke out in the early 1990s and the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan was closed indefinitely.

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<sup>557</sup> Dilip, Hiro. *Inside Central Asia: A Political and Cultural History of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkey, and Iran*. Overlook Duckworth, Peter Mayer Publishers, Inc. New York & London. 2009: 382.

Pakaein, Mohsen. *Čahār sāl dar Sarzamīn-e Teymūr: Hāṭerāt-e safīr-e sābeq-e Īrān dar Ozbakestān (1374-1378)* [Four Years in the Land of Tamerlane: Recollections of Iran’s Former Ambassador to Uzbekistan (~1995-1999)] Oral History Unit, Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS) Tehran, 2010: 113-114.

<sup>558</sup> Interview with Professor Dr Abdusamat Khaydarov, Tashkent, 28<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

<sup>559</sup> “Iran Ready for Development of ECO Transportation” *Tehran Times*. December 8, 1998. URL: [www.tehrantimes.com/news/23097/Iran-Ready-for-Development-of-ECO-Transportation](http://www.tehrantimes.com/news/23097/Iran-Ready-for-Development-of-ECO-Transportation)

<sup>560</sup> Hunter, Shireen T. *Iran and the World: Continuity in a Revolutionary Decade*. Indiana University Press. 1990: 90-91.

These emblematic moments of the first decade of independence can be juxtaposed against the much more recent diplomatic visit by Khamal Kharrazi—former Minister of Foreign Affairs and current head of the Strategic Council on Foreign Relations—to Tashkent in the spring of 2019. At that venue, the idea of connecting Uzbekistan’s rail link to Mazar-e Sharif with Iran’s rail link to Herat, both major cities in Afghanistan, was voiced, as well as that of boosting the volume of goods shipped through Iran’s ports. Perhaps more importantly on a discursive level, during the visit, Iran’s and Uzbekistan’s representatives underscored the role of the said ports as the closest and most convenient outlet for Central Asian exports, as well as discursively predicating Central Asia as the shortest and most strategically important overland transit route for Iran to access the ever-growing Chinese market.<sup>561</sup> As an illustration of the sheer strategic and symbolic importance of the port of Bandar Abbas, Dr Yuldasheva points out how, in the mid-2000s, some 60 percent of Uzbekistan’s cotton—the country’s main cash-crop export—was shipped through this port alone.<sup>562</sup> On the Iranian side of the equation, former ambassador Pakaein recalls in his memoir that, during his tenure, the ‘Uzbeks’ would rent out a massive warehouse in Bandar Abbas dedicated entirely to the storage of Uzbekistan’s cotton headed for export.<sup>563</sup>

It is clear that the *topos* of ‘Bender Abbas’ epitomizes, in the eyes of Uzbekistan’s elite, a strategic reorientation away from Moscow and a diversification of economic lifelines. Iran is conspicuously absent from any serious plans on providing

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<sup>561</sup> Yuldasheva, Guli. “Iran-Uzbekistan Relations in the Regional Security Context”. *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding*, 8(1) 2020: 193-194.

<sup>562</sup> Yuldasheva, Guli. *Geopolitičeskie protsessy v sovremennoĭ tsentral’noĭ Azii: Iran i SŠA* [Geopolitical Processes in Contemporary Central Asia: Iran and the US]. Latvian Institute of International Affairs, Riga. 2017: 176.

<sup>563</sup> Pakaein, Mohsen. *Čahār sāl dar Sarzamīn-e Teymūr: Hāṭerāt-e safīr-e sābeq-e Īrān dar Ozbakestān (1374-1378)* [Four Years in the Land of Tamerlane: Recollections of Iran’s Former Ambassador to Uzbekistan (~1995-1999)] Oral History Unit, Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS) Tehran, 2010: 267.

Uzbekistan with export routes for its natural gas, as pipelines projects and their planned itineraries are easier to influence by diplomatic and economic pressure. For instance, in the case of Uzbekistan's neighbour Turkmenistan, American pressure and Washington's opposition to any major east–west pipeline projects that would use Iranian territory—combined with ongoing challenges to the Washington-favoured trans-Caspian gas pipeline project, as well as to the TAPI (Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India) pipeline—effectively caused a total reorientation of Turkmenistan's gas-exporting economy towards China, another example of sanctions backlash.<sup>564</sup>

International sanctions also failed to fundamentally alter Uzbekistan's reliance on Iranian ports. They did, however, more recently reduce, as Dr Yuldasheva points out, the overall share of Uzbekistan's exports shipped out through Iran's ports on the Persian Gulf, chiefly Bandar Abbas.<sup>565</sup> For as long as the security situation in Afghanistan remains unpredictable, Iran and its ports of Bandar Abbas and Chabahar will remain strategically advantageous for Central Asia's economies, over a 'geographically equidistant' place like Pakistan and its own ports of Karachi and Gwadar, requiring transit through Afghanistan.<sup>566</sup> Conversely, in the southwestern direction, Iran would also serve as a key transit country for Central Asia's trade with Turkey and Europe. In the other direction, Iran is Turkey's 'gate to Asia'. In light of Europe's ongoing struggle to find alternative sources of cheap natural gas (since the book's 2017 publication rendered even more acute by Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine and the downstream

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<sup>564</sup> See Yuldasheva, Guli. *Geopolitičeskie protsessy v sovremennoj tsentral'noj Azii: Iran i SŠA* [Geopolitical Processes in Contemporary Central Asia: Iran and the US]. Latvian Institute of International Affairs, Riga. 2017: 183, 226-227.

<sup>565</sup> Yuldasheva, Guli. "Iran-Uzbekistan Relations in the Regional Security Context". *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding*, 8(1) 2020: 190.

<sup>566</sup> See Yuldasheva, Guli. *Geopolitičeskie protsessy v sovremennoj tsentral'noj Azii: Iran i SŠA* [Geopolitical Processes in Contemporary Central Asia: Iran and the US]. Latvian Institute of International Affairs, Riga. 2017: 162.

effects of this) Dr Yuldasheva rules out Iran ever realistically becoming an overland supplier of gas for the ‘Southern Gas Corridor’ and the constituent, currently underused TANAP (Trans-Anatolian Pipeline). Similarly, Iranian territory is unlikely to be used for the transit of Central Asia’s natural gas through the aforementioned pipeline, even if all US sanctions are lifted. Dr Yuldasheva discursively ascribes the cause of this to Tehran’s continuing deference to Moscow: the Kremlin sees any competition in terms of alternative gas supplies to Europe with hostility.<sup>567</sup> Despite a window of opportunity opening to Iran in this respect, following the bulk of Russia’s gas supplies to Europe being cut, Tehran’s aforementioned perennial deference to Moscow will disallow Iran from stepping in to fill some of this supply deficiency.

The benefits of new material connectivity linking Uzbekistan and those nearby non-post-Soviet Asian powers with which Tashkent could scarcely have entertained any semblance of official relations during the Cold War are discursively framed as far from being just cost-benefit-analysis-driven. Khasanov and Nurmetova very much frame the issue as one of ‘resuming’ pre-existing historical ties with the Middle East and South Asia.<sup>568</sup> There is clearly some interplay of easily-quantifiable material ties with intangible links—however downplayed or obfuscated during the Soviet era—of a historico-cultural nature. Even the aforementioned notion of economic and strategic ‘diversification’ away from Moscow’s orbit in Uzbekistan’s elite discourse does not seem completely divorced from the notion of rekindling the previously-obscured ‘civilizational affinity’ with other Muslim-majority states.

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<sup>567</sup> Ibid., 118, 189.

<sup>568</sup> Khasanov, Ulugbek; Nurmetova, Mavluda. “Growing Potential of Central Asian Trade Logistics”. *GCRF Compass Policy Brief*, 15 February 2022: 5.

Some degree of interdependence under such circumstances of newfound material connectivity was to be expected, a curious ‘blind spot’ among my interviewees has nonetheless been the strong asymmetry and one-sided nature of the recently-achieved economic and strategic interdependence. No past instances where said asymmetry was wielded as a diplomatic weapon by Iran against the Republic of Uzbekistan had been broached. An early example would be Uzbekistan officials dragging their feet about officially registering a local branch of Iran’s *Bank-e Saderat* in the republic in a context of sanctions-related uncertainty, an objective ultimately attained when Iran’s then-ambassador Pakaein threatened to deny ‘the Uzbeks’ access to the Bandar Abbas export outlet.<sup>569</sup> A decade later, analogous arm-twisting by Tehran sought to get Tashkent to relent in its opposition to Iran-led construction of the *Sangtūda-2* dam hydroelectric project in the ‘upstream republic’ of Tajikistan (see pages 63-64 for more details).<sup>570</sup> This state of asymmetric economic interdependence would nevertheless hardly be something Uzbekistan’s policymaking elite would be particularly proud of, assuming any of my interlocutors know both the facts and their strategic implications to begin with. In practical terms, familiarity with this strategic vulnerability would seemingly only further solidify policy resolve to seek additional alternative routes and outlets to the ‘open seas’. On a whole, however, this singular dependency on Iran—through the Bandar Abbas port—does not seem to keep foreign policymakers in Tashkent up at night, so to speak. That fact alone should be revealing of a specific intersubjective

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<sup>569</sup> Pakaein, Mohsen. *Čahār sāl dar Sarzamīn-e Teymūr: Hāṭerāt-e saḡīr-e sābeq-e Īrān dar Ozbakestān (1374-1378)* [Four Years in the Land of Tamerlane: Recollections of Iran’s Former Ambassador to Uzbekistan (~1995-1999)] Oral History Unit, Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS) Tehran, 2010: 213-214.

<sup>570</sup> Chaudet, Didier. “Perceived and Real Threats Coming from the South: The Impact of Iran and of the AfPak Region on Post-Soviet Central Asian Security”. *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 14(3) 2012: 348.



element on the Uzbekistani side of the Iran–Uzbekistan equation, one that constructivism is particularly apt to account for.

*B) Immaterial barriers to connectivity*

When discussing material and immaterial connectivity between Iran and Central Asia, it would be amiss not to also discuss those barriers to said connectivity that go beyond mere extraterritorial sanctions regimes. ‘Soft’ endogenous barriers to greater regional connectivity occupy a liminal space between ‘the material’ and ‘the immaterial’. Both formal and informal non-tariff obstructions typically end up producing bottlenecks at border crossings. They include, but are not limited to, volumes of superfluous red tape, lack of coordination between various government agencies, limited availability of prior notification and of pre-clearance procedures. They are not only an obstacle for speedy movement of goods between Central Asia and adjacent sub-regions, but also between the republics of post-Soviet Central Asia themselves.<sup>571</sup> Dr Yuldasheva admittedly challenges the implicit notion that there needs to be first an as-streamlined-as-possible administrative and tax regime for transregional material connectivity to be able to follow suit. Instead she discursively reverses the causal link and suggests that physical infrastructure networks need to be built first and the reduction of tariff and non-tariff barriers will organically follow suit, promoted by the resulting politico-economic incentive structures.<sup>572</sup>

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<sup>571</sup> Khasanov, Ulugbek; Nurmetova, Mavluda. “Growing Potential of Central Asian Trade Logistics”. *GCRF Compass Policy Brief*, 15 February 2022: 12.

For the non-post-Soviet side of the equation, a major ‘soft’ administrative barrier for the movement of people used to be visa requirements.

<sup>572</sup> Yuldasheva, Guli. *Geopolitičeskie protsessy v sovremennoï tsentral’noï Azii: Iran i SŠA* [Geopolitical Processes in Contemporary Central Asia: Iran and the US]. Latvian Institute of International Affairs, Riga. 2017: 211-212.

Large-scale infrastructure projects promising to boost regional connectivity, as well as investments capable of introducing much-needed technical know-how are discursively framed as something Central Asian republics—Uzbekistan included—as well as Iran cannot secure without an exogenous economic intervention. Unlike the previously mentioned ‘soft’ barriers to cross-border trade, in these instances, the creation of a favourable investment climate and legal framework are deemed an absolute pre-requisite. Only then, with local efforts of economic and technological giants from the West and China, can the impasse in terms of material connectivity in the Iran-Central Asia macro-region be overcome.<sup>573</sup>

Connectivity, both material and immaterial, implies official links between institutions. Aside from embassies set up by Iran and by Uzbekistan in each other’s respective country, elite perceptions are also informed by official ties between research institutions and those of higher learning. Dr Allaeva bemoans the paucity of academic collaborations and partnerships between universities in Uzbekistan and their counterparts in the Islamic Republic of Iran, even though she admits that the period preceding her research internship in Iran in 2009 had been even worse in that respect.<sup>574</sup> A ‘rediscovery’, on an elite level, of further pre-existing immaterial ties between the two countries can arguably be expedited by greater scholarly cross-pollination. All instances of said cooperation have nonetheless so far taken place on the level of individual scholars, with virtually zero official scientific research programmes in place. The sole official events of an outreach nature are said to be those held by the Islamic Republic’s consulate in Tashkent. An anecdote illustrating the absence of official support of academics, on either the Iranian or the Uzbekistan side, was Dr Allaeva

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<sup>573</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>574</sup> Interview with Dr Nigora Allaeva, Tashkent, 5<sup>th</sup> of May 2022.

having been required to apply for a small grant from the Austria-based Iran Institute to be able to travel and attend a conference in Tehran in 2019.<sup>575</sup> The lack of more substantial academic links between Uzbekistan and Iran was seconded to me by Toshov.<sup>576</sup> This is noteworthy, as his home institution—Uzbekistan’s Academy of Science’s Abu Rayhan Biruni Institute of Oriental Studies—would typically be the first academic point of contact with visiting Middle Eastern humanities scholars.

With mid-level institutional links between Uzbekistan and its Muslim-majority non-post-Soviet (almost-)neighbours, as well as the previously-explored limits to high-level official ties, another feasible avenue in terms of immaterial connectivity is so-called ‘people’s diplomacy’.<sup>577</sup> The latter concept implies having a ‘civilizational reconnection’ of said territories materialize according to a bottom-up logic, rather than a top-down one. In the Baku-Azerbaijani case explored in the previous chapter, family links in Iran and the more recent expatriate diaspora on both sides are more self-evident than in the case of Uzbekistan, which is separated from Iran by large stretches of either Turkmenistan’s or Afghanistan’s territory. As a consequence, many early instances of Iranian citizens residing in newly-independent Uzbekistan had included the adventurism of unscrupulous businessmen interested in ‘making a quick buck’ and leaving shortly afterwards. Because of the poor reputation of Iranian goods supplied by the latter, Turkey quickly filled this entire niche of imported goods.<sup>578</sup>

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<sup>575</sup> Interview with Dr Nigora Allaeva, Tashkent, 5<sup>th</sup> of May 2022.

<sup>576</sup> Interview with Dr Nuryoghdi Toshov, Tashkent, 25<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

<sup>577</sup> Mamajonov, Otabekmirzo. “On Uzbek-Afghan Cultural Relations”. in Ismailova, Gulnoza S.; Khasanov, Ulugbek A. (Eds.) *Modern Central Asia: Resilience and Capacity Building*. Tashkent, University of World Economics and Diplomacy (UWED), Kent, GCRF COMPASS, Print Edition. 2021: 278.

<sup>578</sup> Pakaein, Mohsen. *Čahār sāl dar Sarzamīn-e Teymūr: Hāṭerāt-e safīr-e sābeq-e Īrān dar Ozbakestān (1374-1378)* [Four Years in the Land of Tamerlane: Recollections of Iran’s Former Ambassador to Uzbekistan (~1995-1999)] Oral History Unit, Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS) Tehran, 2010: 80-81.

A reported sentiment experienced in Uzbekistan, equally as a result of the Iranian presence, as well as of the Turkish one, is frustration about being patronized. Toshov would communicate his frustration with Iranian tourists in Samarqand casually defaulting to Persian when asking presumed-locals for directions.<sup>579</sup> I would find his criticism puzzling as the only other likely language these tourists would know is English, the familiarity with which is not commonplace in the city, unlike Tajiki Persian. I would ultimately conclude that the aforementioned negative emotional reaction by educated citizens of Uzbekistan is likely due to a perceived implicit claim of cultural ownership by said Iranians, rather than the practicalities of making oneself understood. The same scholar would impart an anecdote of an Iranian newspaper in consulted archives highlighting that the ‘Soviet’ dogs Belka and Strelka sent on a return trip to the Earth’s thermosphere in 1960 were of ‘Iranian pedigree’. This would resonate negatively with Toshov’s personal dislike, seconded in some other Tashkent interviews, of ‘primitive ethnonationalism’.<sup>580</sup> There is no indication that this had been asserted merely to placate a ‘Western’ researcher, or to replicate currently-hegemonic intellectual fashions. Instead it seems largely in line with Uzbekistan’s version of nationbuilding, which is on the whole state-centric, if not outright civic-minded, and almost entirely devoid of institutionalized solidarity with ethnic Uzbeks who are citizens of neighbouring sovereign states.

Uzbekistan’s society and political culture likewise contain an antipathy *vis-à-vis* the ethnonationalism-fuelled ideology of pan-Turkism. The seeds of this, as has been shown earlier in this chapter, can be traced back to the Jadids of the Emirate of Bukhara, but the dislike for pan-Turkism was likely further intensified under Islam Karimov’s

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<sup>579</sup> Interview with Dr Nuryoghdi Toshov, Tashkent, 25<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

<sup>580</sup> Interview with Nuryoghdi Toshov, Tashkent, 25<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

rule. This does not imply a denial of the ethnolinguistic links Uzbeks have with Turks and other Turkic peoples, but these are reportedly treated by Uzbekistan's elite as only marginally more relevant than historical and cultural links with Iran.<sup>581</sup> Dr Yuldasheva goes as far as to discursively attribute Tashkent elite's dislike of pan-Turkist messaging to Uzbekistan's substantial Tajiki Persian-speaking minority<sup>582</sup>—an explanation of which I am personally dubious. Given Uzbekistan's strategic and demographic centrality in the region, as well as its elite's unwillingness to see the former Russian 'older brother' supplanted by a Turkish one, the above factors represent a major stumbling block for Ankara.<sup>583</sup>

In that respect, Tashkent elite attitudes differ substantially from those in Baku. In the interview with the same political scientist, the latter discursively juxtaposes the two. In her view, Baku-Azerbaijanis go out of their way to downplay their historical and cultural links with Iran and make it clear that their declared 'kin state' and statebuilding model is the Turkish Republic. Dr Yuldasheva would recall herself wincing at a conference hosted by an Iranian institution in the Islamic Republic where Baku-Azerbaijani academics would performatively level heaps of criticism on the host country, violating guest etiquette in more than one way.<sup>584</sup> There is some evidence that both Uzbekistan's self-experienced centrality to the sub-region, as well as the acknowledged role of Persian language both in the past and, more narrowly, in the present—despite decades of assimilationist pressures in the latter case—'inoculates' the

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<sup>581</sup> Pakaein, Mohsen. *Čahār sāl dar Sarzamīn-e Teymūr: Hāṭerāt-e safīr-e sābeq-e Īrān dar Ozbakestān* (1374-1378) [Four Years in the Land of Tamerlane: Recollections of the Former Iranian Ambassador to Uzbekistan (~1995-1999)] Oral History Unit, Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS) Tehran, 2010: 182-183.

<sup>582</sup> Yuldasheva, Guli. *Geopolitičeskie protsessy v sovremennoj tsentral'noj Azii: Iran i SŠA* [Geopolitical Processes in Contemporary Central Asia: Iran and the US]. Latvian Institute of International Affairs, Riga. 2017: 113-114.

<sup>583</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>584</sup> Interview with Dr Guli Yuldasheva, Tashkent, 6<sup>th</sup> of May 2022.

country's elite against similar 'Turcophile' messaging. By extension there is no controversy in Uzbekistan over historical figures equally claimed by Iran. Such 'competing' claims were not deemed important enough by any of my interlocutors to be spontaneously brought up in the course of the interviews. Recollections by Iran's then-ambassador to Uzbekistan seem to corroborate this. Mediaeval figures, such as the turn-of the millennium polymath Avicenna or the mid-second millennium miniaturist Behzad, are registered by elite citizens of Uzbekistan as parts of their own national history, yet they appear unfazed by Iranian interlocutors laying analogous claims.<sup>585</sup> New Persian and the Persianate high culture of the past are equally perceived as 'home-grown' by Uzbekistan's elite and are not, in any meaningful way, linked to the Iranian plateau.

The predicative quality of a major immaterial barrier to greater mutual understanding across the former Soviet border is discursively attributed to Soviet legacies, not least the secular form of government. Furthermore, the legacies of Soviet-era socialization and the continued use of Russian as a regional elite *lingua franca* are behind discursively upholding conceptual dichotomies along geopolitical lines that no longer reflect reality. Just as there had been in my Baku interviews, there were instances of the use of the linguistic shorthand '*naši Azerbaïdžantsy*' (Russian for 'our Azerbaijanis') by my Uzbekistani interlocutors, in explicit juxtaposition to those Iranian citizens who are native speakers of Azerbaijani Turkish.<sup>586</sup> This implies the existence of a discursive frame, or scheme, conveying collective affinity with national groups and with current-day independent states based entirely on the shared experience of prior

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<sup>585</sup> Pakaein, Mohsen. *Čahār sāl dar Sarzamīn-e Teymūr: Hāṭerāt-e safīr-e sābeq-e Īrān dar Ozbakestān* (1374-1378) [Four Years in the Land of Tamerlane: Recollections of Iran's Former Ambassador to Uzbekistan (~1995-1999)] Oral History Unit, Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS) Tehran, 2010: 217, 323.

<sup>586</sup> Interview with Dr Guli Yuldasheva, Tashkent, 6<sup>th</sup> of May 2022.

coexistence within the same Soviet polity. The aforementioned interlocutor would ascribe to a ‘Soviet mindset’ the single most important barrier to Iran–Uzbekistan relations,<sup>587</sup> be it on a bottom-up, or on a top-down level. The younger Allaeva, who could not have possibly experienced any of her socialization in the Soviet era, is more specific and ascribes the cause of this immaterial barrier to greater connectivity between Iran and Uzbekistan—and by extension to entirety of post-Soviet space—to the ‘highly secular nature’ of Uzbekistan’s political and intellectual elite.<sup>588</sup>

*C) Chabahar, Afghanistan, and north–south connectivity*

As has been asserted, freight-oriented infrastructure has been much more difficult to restrain by international sanctions regimes than hydrocarbon pipeline projects, in part due to the multi-modal and inter-operable nature of the former. Furthermore, in case of the expansion of the Chabahar port and the building of rail and road connections leading to this hub on the Gulf of Oman, both Indian involvement—New Delhi being the growing regional counter-balance to Beijing—and hopes of connecting and developing Afghanistan have jointly incentivized successive US administrations to uphold a sanctions exemption.<sup>589</sup> The use of the aforementioned Bandar Abbas is deemed less and less well-suited for the pursuit of Uzbekistan’s geoeconomic interests. The aforementioned Persian Gulf port is susceptible to a hypothetical closure of the Strait of Hormuz strategic chokepoint. Furthermore, Bandar Abbas lacks a deep water port facility. The deep water port of Chabahar is planned to handle container ships that are more than twice the size and carrying capacity. The largest vessels that use the port of Bandar Abbas cannot exceed 100,000 metric tons. By contrast, the planned capacity of

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<sup>587</sup> Interview with Dr Guli Yuldasheva, Tashkent, 6<sup>th</sup> of May 2022.

<sup>588</sup> Interview with Dr Nigora Allaeva, Tashkent, 5<sup>th</sup> of May 2022.

<sup>589</sup> Yuldasheva, Guli. “Iran-Uzbekistan Relations in the Regional Security Context”. *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding*, 8(1) 2020: 192.

Chabahar would accommodate vessels weighing up to 250,000 metric tons, the increasingly-standard size for global container shipping.<sup>590</sup> Despite the aforementioned reassurances by Washington, Dr Khaydarov insists that the progress on the Zahedan–Chabahar rail link has been mired by the currently-in-effect unilaterally-reimposed US sanctions.<sup>591</sup> It is at least partly in light of these complications that Uzbekistan is discursively constructed, by the dual discursive means of nomination and predication, as the nation—short of the Islamic Republic itself—the most desperately waiting to see Iran unburdened of the bulk of American extraterritorial sanctions.<sup>592</sup>

In the long-run, elites in Uzbekistan would like to see Chabahar facilitate yet another step in the former country’s ‘un(land)locking’, more specifically a diversification of available access points to global shipping routes. Being part of the whole wider International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC) project—one that also seeks to integrate Afghanistan’s transport network with that of Iran and Central Asia, as well as with India and Europe further afield—Chabahar may well reduce Uzbekistan’s dependency on Turkmenistan’s territory for transit. After the aforementioned failure of the bulk of US efforts to promote north–south connectivity on Washington’s own terms, largely within the framework of the ‘New Silk Road’ vision linking Central Asia with South Asia via a counterfactual Taliban-free and stable Afghanistan, an alternative vision along a similar route may well eventually materialize. While the INSTC also promises to link Central Asia to South Asia, this is done

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<sup>590</sup> Ramachandran, Sudha. “India to Invest in Iran’s Chabahar Port”. *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*. 26 Nov 2014 URL: [www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13099-india-to-invest-in-irans-chabahar-port.html](http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13099-india-to-invest-in-irans-chabahar-port.html)

<sup>591</sup> Interview with Professor Dr Abdusamat Khaydarov, Tashkent, 28<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

<sup>592</sup> Interview with Dr Guli Yuldasheva, Tashkent, 6<sup>th</sup> of May 2022.



primarily through Iranian territory.<sup>593</sup> The realization of a branch linking Chabahar to Afghanistan hinges on stability inside the latter country and on the prospects of normalization of relations between the Taliban-led government and the rest of the region. Such a development would, as a consequence, also open yet another duo of major seaports—Karachi and Gwadar in Pakistan—to Central Asia. Only upon witnessing the remarkable progress in the development of the rival China–Pakistan Economic Corridor—one that has hinged on the massive expansion of the latter of the two aforementioned ports—did the Indian parties investing in Chabahar allegedly feel compelled to finally free up the long-promised funds destined for the Iranian section of the project.<sup>594</sup> Those of Uzbekistan’s elite who are cognizant of the rival nature of Chabahar and Gwadar would nevertheless still like to see the two nearby facilities linked, as this would ostensibly suit the strategic interests of both Iran and Central Asia.<sup>595</sup>

A step further than having a branch of the INSTC linking Afghanistan to the Gulf of Oman are initiatives—even further removed from anything practically achievable under the current geopolitical circumstances—that centre Afghanistan as a core of regional connectivity. An idea articulated during meetings between high-level officials of the Republic of Uzbekistan and those of the Islamic Republic of Iran has been of linking the rail lines currently only stretching from Uzbekistan’s and Iran’s border to nearby Mazar-e Sharif and Herat respectively.<sup>596</sup> Aside from needing to overcome the challenge of different rail gauge standards, the line would likely trace the

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<sup>593</sup> Yuldasheva, Guli. “Iran-Uzbekistan Relations in the Regional Security Context”. *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding*, 8(1) 2020: 194-196.

<sup>594</sup> Interview with Dr Guli Yuldasheva, Tashkent, 6<sup>th</sup> of May 2022.

<sup>595</sup> Yuldasheva, Guli. *Geopolitičeskie protsessy v sovremennoĭ tsentral’noĭ Azii: Iran i SŠA* [Geopolitical Processes in Contemporary Central Asia: Iran and the US]. Latvian Institute of International Affairs, Riga. 2017: 228.

<sup>596</sup> Interview with Professor Dr Abdusamat Khaydarov, Tashkent, 28<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

by-far most ‘theoretical’ stretches of the Afghanistan’s Ring Road, casting doubt on the feasibility of the comparatively-more-ambitious rail project. Other regional states such as Turkmenistan and Tajikistan have been discussing making joint use of a future rail link, pitching virtually the same project connecting Afghanistan’s western and northern provinces.<sup>597</sup> The financial capacity of these two Central Asian republics of such a project is even more dismal than Iran and Uzbekistan’s.

In this respect, those Tashkent elite interlocutors with closer ties to the foreign policymaking establishment expressed much more optimism about the feasibility of Taliban-ruled Afghanistan becoming a region-linking transit hub than typically-more-doubtful independent researchers. Khasanov and Nurmetova from the Foreign-Ministry-run University of World Economic and Diplomacy highlight the slight advantage, distance-wise, the Afghanistan–Pakistan route to ‘open seas’ ostensibly holds for Uzbekistan, compared to the INSTC route that would run through Iran.<sup>598</sup> In person, Dr Khasanov would laud the aforementioned heavily-mediatised historic achievement of having a lorry convoy arrive to Tashkent from Mumbai, India, via Pakistan and Afghanistan.<sup>599</sup> This optimism is tempered by interviewees such as Dr Tolipov, who consider any major transit route through Afghanistan a pie-in-the-sky idea for the foreseeable future. The latter independent researcher did however point out, at a time when any concession to the Taliban government was still deemed nationally a taboo, Uzbekistan’s then-foreign minister stating that Tashkent does not deem the Taliban movement a terrorist organization, counter to government documents and official

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<sup>597</sup> Yuldasheva, Guli. *Geopolitičeskie protsessy v sovremennoj tsentral’noi Azii: Iran i SŠA* [Geopolitical Processes in Contemporary Central Asia: Iran and the US]. Latvian Institute of International Affairs, Riga. 2017: 211.

<sup>598</sup> Khasanov, Ulugbek; Nurmetova, Mavluda. “Growing Potential of Central Asian Trade Logistics”. *GCRF Compass Policy Brief*, 15 February 2022: 9.

<sup>599</sup> Interview with Dr Ulugbek Khasanov, Tashkent, 29<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

positions made up to that very point.<sup>600</sup> Unlike the Iranians, who had since then already undertaken some steps inching towards diplomatic recognition<sup>601</sup>—Uzbekistan does not indicate any steps to officially recognize the so-called Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. The latter recognition ostensibly hinges on a series of preconditions, as well as on a broader concerted international wave of recognition. Channels of communication between Tashkent and Kabul do nonetheless exist, as do trade relations between the two countries.<sup>602</sup> This serves Tashkent’s strategic interests as it may eventually seek to make use of Afghanistan as a transit country.

*D) The newest cornerstone of east–west connectivity*

The most topical overland-connectivity issue on the lips of my Tashkent interviewees was the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway. Among those interlocutors who would bring it up, it was discursively predicated in terms of it being a ‘done deal’, with only minor outlying considerations needed to be given to the specific itinerary inside Kyrgyzstan.<sup>603</sup> The strategic motivation for Tashkent behind the project is clear—Uzbekistan cannot afford to miss out on BRI-introduced windfall from increasing east–west overland connectivity. This is particularly pressing after a series of setbacks—discussed above in ‘part two’ of this chapter—of the republic losing its regional share of freight volume transiting its own territory.<sup>604</sup> The motivation for China—and for Eurasian profit-seekers more broadly—is also clear. Rail connecting Kashgar, Osh and

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<sup>600</sup> Interview with Dr Farkhod Tolipov, Tashkent, 27<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

<sup>601</sup> Rahmati, Fidel. “Iran hands over Afghan Embassy in Tehran to Interim Regime of Afghanistan”. *The Khaama Press News Agency*. February 27, 2023. URL: [www.khaama.com/iran-handed-over-afghan-embassy-in-tehran-to-interim-regime-of-afghanistan/](http://www.khaama.com/iran-handed-over-afghan-embassy-in-tehran-to-interim-regime-of-afghanistan/)

<sup>602</sup> Imamova, Navbahor. “Uzbekistan Seeks to Engage Taliban Without Alienating West”. *Voice of America*. May 4, 2022. URL: [www.voanews.com/a/uzbekistan-seeks-to-engage-taliban-without-alienating-west/6557338.html](http://www.voanews.com/a/uzbekistan-seeks-to-engage-taliban-without-alienating-west/6557338.html)

<sup>603</sup> Interview with Dr Ulugbek Khasanov, Tashkent, 29<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

<sup>604</sup> Yuldasheva, Guli. *Geopolitičeskie protsessy v sovremennoj tsentral’noj Azii: Iran i SŠA* [Geopolitical Processes in Contemporary Central Asia: Iran and the US]. Latvian Institute of International Affairs, Riga. 2017: 209.

Andijan—linked to the already-completed Angren-Pop line further west—effectively traverses Central Asia’s demographic and economic, non-hydrocarbon-producing (including agricultural), core. A solid majority of the population of Central Asia—some one-third of the respective populations of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, and some two-thirds of the population of Uzbekistan—live in the Fergana Valley (or in its immediate vicinity), the Tashkent Oasis, or the lower-Zarafshan basin. An international rail link from China to Uzbekistan, competing with the only two Central Asian links currently in place, both crossing into Kazakhstan—either via the Dzungarian Gate (also known as the Alatau or Alashan Pass), or in Khorgos along the Ili Valley—promises a shorter route to the Iranian border, via Turkmenistan. The tradeoff is such a trans-Eurasian rail corridor crossing a larger number of international borders. With the decreasing attractiveness of the northernmost suggested BRI corridor (sometimes magnanimously labelled the ‘New Eurasian Land Bridge’) utilising only the territory of Kazakhstan and Russia, Uzbekistan may well become the strategically-best-placed transit country within Central Asia for east–west connectivity in the BRI framework. It would thereby render itself indispensable and avoid a repetition of the aforementioned past instances of transit opportunities being ‘chipped away’ from Tashkent jointly by Astana and Ashgabat. As long as Tashkent does not place all of its bets on the Kazakhstan-favouring, Iran-circumventing trans-Caspian ‘Middle Corridor’—an unlikely scenario, given the ubiquitous strategic policy imperative to ‘perpetually diversify’—Tehran would be a major indirect beneficiary of the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway.

Only exogenous injections of funding analogous to the one that will enable the aforementioned railway can render the notoriously cash-strapped Republic of Uzbekistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran better endowed with overland material

connectivity with one-another, via the ‘Turkmenistan overland gateway’ and further afield.<sup>605</sup> Past examples of being short of sufficient funding—in those instances concerning already-inherently-more-susceptible-to-sanctions hydrocarbon pipeline connectivity, and exacerbated by categorical US opposition—caused a fundamental reorientation of regional connectivity networks. The energy-poor northeast of Iran is periodically supplied with natural gas via two small-diameter pipelines linking Golestan and Khorasan respectively with Turkmenistan. The first of the two, the Korpje–Kordkuy pipeline, was supposed to be the nucleus of a larger pipeline network traversing northern Iran that would eventually transfer Turkmenistan’s natural gas to Turkish and European consumer markets. The joint pressure of Washington’s categorical opposition and lack of funding nevertheless led to the scrapping of the plan.<sup>606</sup> As an unforeseen consequence for the United States, rather than leading to the attention being shifted towards the construction of the Russia-and-Iran-circumventing TAPI (‘Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India’), or the trans-Caspian pipeline, Turkmenistan reoriented the near-totality of its natural gas output towards China, through the multi-pronged ‘Central Asia–China’ gas pipeline complex. The constructions of a fourth branch following an alternative route that traverses Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan is currently underway, but the already-operational third branch is expected to be fed with Uzbekistan’s and Turkmenistan’s natural gas in equal measure, effectively reorienting the bulk of Central Asia’s gas-based economy eastwards.<sup>607</sup> This

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<sup>605</sup> Yuldasheva, Guli. *Geopolitičeskie protsessy v sovremennoĭ tsentral’noĭ Azii: Iran i SŠA* [Geopolitical Processes in Contemporary Central Asia: Iran and the US]. Latvian Institute of International Affairs, Riga. 2017: 171.

Yuldasheva, Guli. “Iran-Uzbekistan Relations in the Regional Security Context”. *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding*, 8(1) 2020: 187-188.

<sup>606</sup> Yuldasheva, Guli. *Geopolitičeskie protsessy v sovremennoĭ tsentral’noĭ Azii: Iran i SŠA* [Geopolitical Processes in Contemporary Central Asia: Iran and the US]. Latvian Institute of International Affairs, Riga. 2017: 172.

<sup>607</sup> See *ibid.*

means an effective return to a strategically-sub-optimal situation analogous to the early 1990s, when Central Asia's energy exports hinged on a single buyer-cum-reseller (i.e. at that time the Russian Federation). Furthermore, Uzbekistan is quickly running out of natural gas available for export, as the increasing living standards and developing industries in the country hinge on the availability of a cheap domestic energy source.<sup>608</sup>

## Conclusion

It is evident that Tashkent's academic and foreign-policy decisionmaking elite uphold a reasonably coherent regional vision. The quality of an immediate 'inner circle' of geopolitical attention is discursively ascribed to the 'post-Soviet-Central-Asia-cum-Afghanistan nexus', of which Tashkent elites see their own country as the main engine of regionalism. In Tashkent, most of Eurasian geopolitics and geoeconomics—including Uzbekistan's relations with Iran—is filtered through this region-binding prism. The latter has, on the whole, been a constructive and cooperative one the post-Karimov era. This 'inner circle' is followed by secondary ring of regional players kept at an 'equidistant arm's length'. This country-set would undeniably also include both Iran and Turkey, with the first of the two being endowed with the clear acknowledged advantage of its current capacity—and its massive material-connectivity potential further down the line—to 'un(land)lock' both Uzbekistan, and Central Asia more broadly. Material connectivity gives Iran an edge where immaterial connectivity alone failed to do so.

Ethnolinguistic kinship is not deemed a primary motivating factor for Uzbekistan. The region's 'heritage language' of New Persian—still the native tongue of

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<sup>608</sup> Aminjonov, Farkhod; Dovgalyuk, Olesya. "Central Asia–China Gas Pipeline (Line A, Line B, and Line C)". *The People's Map of Global China*. 7 February 2023. URL: [www.thepeoplesmap.net/project/central-asia-china-gas-pipeline-line-a-line-b-and-line-c/](http://www.thepeoplesmap.net/project/central-asia-china-gas-pipeline-line-a-line-b-and-line-c/)

an important minority of both Uzbekistan and Central Asia as a whole—is not domestically analysed as a ‘Middle Eastern tongue’, nor as something inherently tying the region to Iran. Furthermore, neither ethnically-Uzbek citizens of neighbouring countries, nor the Uyghurs of Xinjiang (the latter being the ethnolinguistically-closest kin to the former) are ‘given the time of the day’, so to speak, within centres of power in Tashkent. This lack of actual avenues for—or real willingness, for that matter—engaging in an unmediated manner with ‘co-ethnics’ or ‘civilizational kin’ mirrors the situation, up to more than three decades ago, of Tehran having to first go through Moscow on all matters pertaining to Soviet Central Eurasia. *Realpolitik* largely trumps civilizational affinity. Whenever the two imperatives happen to not directly clash, the aforementioned immaterial connectivity can nevertheless serve as a conduit for the development of further material exchanges and material connectivity. An intersubjective understanding of regional matters informs policy on the Uzbekistan-side of the Iran–Central Eurasia equation. New physical links also facilitate a greater awareness of the sheer prominence of historical and cultural commonalities between the two nations. Iran’s cultural overtures to Uzbekistan have been, on the whole, positively received in Tashkent, especially in the post-Karimov era.

On the flipside, as has been mentioned, there is a stark upholding of the *topos* of ‘equidistance’. The latter fundamentally impedes finer hierarchies within Tashkent’s second ring of regional interlocutors to appear: the rule is ‘no favourites’. The, for example, renders—to the likely dismay of an Iranian observer—Pakistan’s standing *vis-à-vis* Uzbekistan roughly equivalent to Iran’s. The rare instances of interviewees discursively challenging such a notion were scholars with a rich background of collaborating with Iranians and this tilted their assessment away from the Tashkent elite

mainstream. Admittedly there are more-mainstream instances of members of the foreign-policy elite intellectually invested in seeing the ‘sleeping economic giant’ of Iran finally rise one day, with the likely windfall it would imply for Uzbekistan. This idea explains the particular frustration of Tashkent elites with the unilateral US reimposition of anti-Iran sanctions. While this frustration—alongside the belief that the efforts to contain and isolate Iran internationally will ultimately backfire—was not conveyed particularly strongly in the context of a talk to ‘an audience of one’, and a ‘Western’ researcher at that—these conclusions are more-readily legible in published English- and Russian-language works by the very same authors that target a wider audience.

Another discernible dichotomy in Tashkent—unlike the situation in Baku—has been between those foreign-policy researchers with close institutional connections to the foreign policymaking establishment and those that chose—or were forced to seek—a more independent-researcher career trajectory. The former appear to communicate unbridled optimism pertaining to the relative stability in Afghanistan ostensibly opening a new array of connectivity options for Central Asia. The latter subset of interlocutors—clearly further removed from hegemonic national foreign-policy discourse—deems any such transport corridor, promising to make use of Afghanistan’s territory, a pipe dream. By this stage, more than three decades after independence, Iran’s main port of Bandar Abbas has acquired an intersubjective understanding, among the elites in Tashkent, of a reliable go-to access route to international shipping for the bulk of Uzbekistan’s exports. This is something no other transit country, or alternative transport corridor at Tashkent’s disposal, can currently claim—with any credibility—to possess.



## **Chapter 5: Comparative Analysis of the Main Findings on the Topic of Iran– Central Eurasia Relations**

The previous two empirical chapters uphold the contention of there being a discernible and productive dialectic between material and immaterial connectivity in Iran–Central Eurasia relations. The notion of ‘immaterial connectivity’—coined for the purposes of this doctoral work—introduces a novel way of conceptualizing the ‘civilizational-cultural capital’ shared between independent nation-states as a counterpart to materially-grounded physical infrastructure. This approach leverages the epistemology—and the corresponding theoretical IR framework—of constructivism to ascertain the effect of these intersubjective dimensions of the Iran–Central Asia equation, as well as of its constituent Iran–Azerbaijan and Iran–Uzbekistan dyads. The specific choice of the latter regional dyads has been vindicated in ways further explored in this chapter. In the first section, elite perspectives in Baku and Tashkent (and to some extent also in Tehran)—critically examined through discourse analysis—are triangulated, compared and contrasted. The second section looks at the possibility of extrapolation of these two circumscribed case studies (i.e. to what extent can this insight be applied to the macro-region of Central Eurasia at large?) The latter also explores ways in which the discursive treatment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the Republic of Azerbaijan and in Uzbekistan can be applied to their own respective sub-regions of the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Conversely, the limits of this broader applicability are also considered. The third—and last—section directly tackles the research questions and offers a final corroboration, albeit with some necessary qualifications, of the research hypothesis. The chapter concludes with a discussion of possible future research avenues.

### **I) Triangulating the empirical findings of the previous three chapters**

The way the past, present and future trajectories for the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Uzbekistan are envisioned in their own hegemonic national discourse contrast starkly with the qualities discursively attributed to them in elite discourse of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The latter's insistence that all of Central Asia (plus Azerbaijan) are constituents of the same internally-coherent Iranian-Islamic civilization—which roughly corresponds to the sphere of 'Persianate' elite culture of centuries past—and therefore deserving greater regional engagement with Iran rings hollow among elites in both Baku and Tashkent, albeit for divergent reasons.

In the case of the Republic of Azerbaijan, choices have been made, following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, to strategically align with the Republic of Turkey in 'junior-partner' capacity. The ascendancy of the Aliyev family marked a mere course-correction away from prior overt Russia- and Iran-antagonizing policies. Ankara has still served as Baku's principal 'source of emulation' for much of the past three decades. Without seeking NATO membership, Baku has consistently sought broader geopolitical alignment with the West. A major sticking point to the Islamic Republic for at least the past decade has been the ever-closer Azerbaijan-Israel relationship. Those elites in the Republic of Azerbaijan who were socialized in the Soviet era still take more conspicuous pride in the secular nature of Azerbaijan's political system and of secular state institutions, even though there is no guarantee that this will continue completely unchallenged with the incoming young generation of national elites. Regarding Iran, there is also a high degree of downplaying of Shia-Muslim regional affinity and of the shared still-relatively-recent past as parts of the same historical polity in ways that seek to render Tehran's 'immaterial-connectivity'-based overtures ineffectual (and this

mitigation has been largely successful on the elite level). In terms of transcending confessionally-defined ‘civilizational lines’, there is also no real willingness in Baku to engage in regionalism centred on the South Caucasus. Even in the scenario of a sustainable settlement being reached with Yerevan, things are unlikely to change dramatically in that respect, if one were to extrapolate from the track record of the pragmatic, yet devoid-of-serious-regionalist-ambitions, Baku–Tbilisi relationship.

Uzbekistan, by contrast, has been defined, for much of the independence period, by continuous omnibalancing *vis-à-vis* larger players involved in the region, most prominently Russia, China, and the United States. Admittedly the period of Tashkent courting the West culminated in Uzbekistan’s GUAM membership, but ended abruptly in response to the international condemnation of the Andijan events of 2005. This omnibalancing tendency is juxtaposed against an endogenous resolve for regional leadership (or, at least, co-leadership, alongside Kazakhstan) in Central Asia, to the exclusion of non-Central Asians from the ‘inner circle’. Since the intellectual movements of the early-20<sup>th</sup> century that set the tone of Uzbek nationhood, ‘Turkestan’ has intersubjectively consolidated in Tashkent as a coherent historical and cultural unit of analysis, categorically distinct from the ‘Eurasia’ or the ‘Greater Iran’ metanarratives produced in Moscow and Tehran respectively. Tajikistan (and also, albeit admittedly to a lesser degree, Afghanistan) being deemed an integral part of this vision of Tashkent attests that New Persian and broadly-Iranian culture are understood as home-grown and not deemed intrinsically linked to the Iranian plateau. In light of the commonplace conflation of Turkestan and Central Asia with the mythical realm of Turan—i.e. Iran’s archetypal ‘other’—there are conceptual barriers to ever consider Iran as ‘part of the region’.

Unlike the situation in Baku, the Tashkent elite view of Iran is filtered through the prism of Uzbekistan's ostensible 'natural' leadership role *vis-à-vis* its five neighbours (Afghanistan is included as an integral part of Tashkent's regional equation, despite not being a post-Soviet republic). Iran is kept out of the aforementioned 'inner circle'—defined in terms of civilizational and geopolitical proximity—in an intermediate 'equidistant' space alongside Turkey and—more surprisingly from the elite vantage point in Tehran—Pakistan. This misalignment of the national delineations of 'one's own region' is a recurring pattern in the bulk of the elite interview material. Much like the mid-1993 replacement of Elchibey with Aliyev at the helm in Baku, the 2016 transition from the Karimov to the Mirziyoyev presidency in Tashkent has been associated with marked shift away from overtly-confrontational regional conduct. In pursuit of their country's strategic goals within Central Asia, Uzbekistan's leadership no longer defaults to 'sticks', favouring 'carrots' instead. The previously-mentioned abandoning of closer geopolitical alignment with the West cannot be attributed to the new presidency in Uzbekistan, as it predates the death of Karimov by more than a decade. While both shifts work in favour of the development of closer relations between Tehran and Tashkent, the repetition of a scenario of a major dispute between the latter and Dushanbe being effectively leveraged by the former in pursuit of its own strategic goals is no longer likely. The zero-sum Tehran–Tashkent–Dushanbe triad was dissolved with the arrival of the new incumbent to the Presidential Palace in Tashkent.

*A) Complex economic interdependence juxtaposed against low levels of trade*

In terms of material connectivity, the Republic of Azerbaijan finds itself, immediately upon independence, dependent on Iran as a transit country to supply its own Nakhchivan exclave. This situation had been exacerbated by the territorial conflict with

Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh of the early 1990s. Tehran has not shied away from leveraging this asymmetric economic and logistical interdependence and from using it as a pressure point *vis-à-vis* Baku. Azerbaijan's overall trajectory over the course of the past decades has nonetheless been towards reducing this dependency as much as possible. More recently, this has taken the form of a pipeline project that would secure the flow of natural gas from eastern Turkey to the Nakhchivan exclave. Baku's longer-term strategy has nevertheless been gaining access to the currently-under-negotiations Zangezur corridor, despite having—as of late-2023—likely lost the bargaining chip with Yerevan of the fate of the Karabakh Armenians. Either way, the goal is to diversify material connectivity away from Iran. Elites in Baku would deem the fact that Iran has, since the 1990s, never again figured among Azerbaijan's top-two trading partners a positive development. This is due to the pre-2000 statistics pointing out the Republic's structural and logistical inadequacies, as well as a dearth of economic alternatives, which themselves also stem, in part, from the aforementioned lack of territorial contiguity. This Baku-led trajectory towards ever-less-asymmetric interdependence is juxtaposed against a decrease of Baku's own appetite for leveraging ethnolinguistic links—arguably the most salient dimension of immaterial connectivity between Azerbaijan and Iran, as twice as many native speakers of Azerbaijani Turkish live in Iranian Azerbaijan as do in the Republic of Azerbaijan—against the latter. Conversely, as far as the perceptions of my Baku interlocutors were concerned, ostensible Iranian activities of subversion instrumentalizing the more religiously-inclined Shia Muslim Azerbaijanis that live in this nominally-Shia-majority post-Soviet republic (i.e. the most fraught element of immaterial connectivity with Iran) have been subsiding over time.

By contrast, asymmetric economic interdependence between Uzbekistan and Iran—to the benefit of the latter—has only increased since the linking up of Iran’s rail network with the Soviet-era one in Central Asia in the second half of the 1990s. Much of doubly-landlocked Uzbekistan’s cotton exports has been shipped out of Iran’s Bandar Abbas port ever since, to the extent of the latter toponym resonating with most educated citizens of the aforementioned Central Asian republic. I ascribe the rationale behind this never having been portrayed by any of my interlocutors as a strategic vulnerability—despite Tashkent’s additional efforts to diversify even further, hoping to transform Afghanistan into a transit country for Uzbekistan’s exports and imports that would be passing through Pakistan’s seaports—to their awareness, albeit only rarely vocalized, that the Bandar Abbas route saved the country from the suboptimal scenario of an indefinite dependency on inadequate Moscow-centred Soviet-era railway networks.<sup>609</sup> Prominent cases, described in the previous chapters, of Tehran issuing threats to Tashkent that hint at the possibility to denying access to this route during disputes (see page 240) seem forgiven and forgotten. This is compounded by an elite awareness, solidified over time, that Iran’s post-independence track record in Central Asia has been consistently non-ideological and one of upholding of the regional *status quo*. While past strongly-worded accusations by Uzbekistan’s leadership that Tehran seeks to politicize the agenda of multilateral regional bodies, such as the Economic Cooperation Organization, have also been largely forgotten, so have been any hopes in Tashkent to see ECO bring meaningful economic dividends. Uzbekistan’s own large-but-mostly-unacknowledged Persophone minority of Tajiki speakers—arguably a potentially-

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<sup>609</sup> Pakaein, Mohsen. *Čahār sāl dar Sarzamīn-e Teymūr: Hāterāt-e safīr-e sābeq-e Īrān dar Ozbakestān* (1374-1378) [Four Years in the Land of Tamerlane: Recollections of Iran’s Former Ambassador to Uzbekistan (~1995-1999)] Oral History Unit, Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS) Tehran, 2010: 292.

fraught element of the aforementioned immaterial connectivity—is not deemed a strategic vulnerability in Tashkent in terms of Iran’s regional influence, nor are—at least since some initial fears in the 1990s—the Samarqand and Bukhara-based *Eroniy* Shias.

In light of the current slew of international sanctions targeting the Russian Federation on grounds of its ongoing aggression against Ukraine, much hope is being placed on the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway project. The latter project’s final approval and later completion would render a ‘southern’ itinerary for east–west BRI connectivity—one traversing Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Iran (see Figure n.5), rather than linking up Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan through the trans-Caspian ‘Middle Corridor’—more attractive in the long-term for overland freight despatched between China and Europe.<sup>610</sup> The resolution of the dispute over the Caspian Sea delimitation—despite the still-pending ratification on the Iranian side—also suggests that military escalations of the type that transpired between Iran and Azerbaijan at the turn of the millennium are a thing of the past, despite periodic build-up of tension between the two countries over other outstanding issues. On the whole, constructivism comes in handy to account for the vastly divergent threat perception in Baku and Tashkent respectively that could stem from both material (i.e. supply lines causing asymmetric economic interdependence) and immaterial (i.e. ‘potentially disloyal’ religious and ethnolinguistic minorities) connectivity with Iran.

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<sup>610</sup> The multimodal nature of the Caspian-Sea-traversing Middle Corridor produces significant bottlenecks that likely cannot be fully remediated.

*B) Divergent approaches to history and nationbuilding*

As was indicated in the overview chapter and corroborated in the twin empirical chapters, an official interpretation of historical events and the associated narratives of statehood and nationhood inform the intersubjective understanding of a state's identity, including—as a constructivist IR lens reveals—in the international arena. While this process of statebuilding and nationbuilding has since slowed down in the Caspian-Central Asian subset of the former Soviet space—to the extent of now being largely consolidated—there is still some undeniable overlap between Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan. Issues arise when there is conspicuous incongruence between territoriality, statehood, and ethnolinguistics. For instance, the choice of Amir Timur as the ostensible 'father of the Uzbek nation' clashes with the fact of his dynastic progeny having had been eventually displaced from Transoxiana by Abu'l Khayrid-Shaybanid Uzbeks, the precursors of the ethnonym of the country's titular group. This is ultimately justified by the rule of thumb that any invader of Transoxiana, from the mediaeval period onward, is automatically 'the antagonist' in Uzbekistan's national historiography. Analogous nationbuilding dilemmas get the exact opposite treatment of concomitant political developments in Baku-Azerbaijani historiography. In the latter instance, this touches directly upon competing national historiography of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Members of the Safavid lineage, originating from 'Southern Azerbaijan', topple the arguably-more-'native' Baku-based Shirvanshahs. Consequently, the latter dynasty's remote Arab lineage and their use of Persian as a court language is used to justify their destruction as an inevitability, necessary to 'give way to the inception of Azerbaijani nationhood'.



On the Iranian side, there are quandaries over the inconsistent use of the adjective *Īrānī(-tabār)*—meaning ‘Iranian’, ‘Iranic’ or ‘of Iranian extraction’—when referring to the history of the South Caucasus and to Central Asia. On the one hand, the adjective would be used by people such as the career diplomat Pakaein to describe mediaeval *literati* from territories coinciding with the contemporary territory of Uzbekistan and the Republic of Azerbaijan, such as Biruni and Nizami respectively. On the other hand, the contribution of an expatriate craftsman or architect hailing from the Iranian plateau to a specific Timurid-era historical sight in Samarqand (i.e. outside of ‘Iran’ *stricto sensu*) is relayed by the very same ex-ambassador to Uzbekistan—and more recently to the Republic of Azerbaijan—by the very same adjective. This shows just how fraught it is to talk about supposed historical continuity in each of the respective modern-day nation-states, as is to seek to distinguish their respective progenitors—real or imagined—when subscribing to the regionally-prevalent primordialist treatment of a nationhood.

The deeply resonant, regionally-speaking, mythical imagery of the feuding ‘Iran–Turan’ dyad has ongoing bearing on the self-perception of both modern-day Iranians, as well as—albeit to a lesser extent—on modern-day Uzbeks. With the Amu Darya serving as the conceptual boundary, a given location finding itself ‘beyond the river’—such as the city of Samarqand—would not tend to be described as ‘Iranian’ in contemporary Iranian sources, but rather as part of *Īrān-zamīn*, *Īrān-e Bozorg* (‘Greater Iran’) or *Ĥorāsān-e Bozorg* (‘Greater Khorasan’). This puts Iran’s contemporary northeastern neighbourhood in two separate conceptual baskets. Modern-day cities of Herat or Zaranj, located in the historical regions of Khorasan and Sistan respectively, and the Merv oasis, also located in the former, would warrant being referred to as

‘*Īrānī*’, despite being located in Afghanistan and Turkmenistan respectively and therefore not within the contemporary confines of the Islamic Republic of Iran. While not being used in a completely systematic and consistent fashion in Tehran, the Amu Darya as the boundary between ‘Iran’ and ‘Turan’ continues to serve as a meaningful conceptual divide to Iran’s northeast. No such deep poetic resonance is in place to Iran’s northwest, on either side of the Aras—except perhaps the rather parochial Baku-Azerbaijani ‘literature of longing’ genre.

*C) Other contrasting areas*

The historical trajectory of the Russian-controlled realms of the South Caucasus diverges from those of Central Asia in the eyes of the Islamic Republic’s elite insofar as the former is at times deemed ‘irrevocably westernized’. In the case of Armenia and Georgia, this is easily imputable to the two countries’ strong Christian majorities. In the case of the elites of the nominally-Shia-majority Republic of Azerbaijan, however, there is a more unexpected chasm between the latter and Iranian elites—including those hailing from Iranian Azerbaijan. Cultural literacy and ease of mutual understanding is relayed in the analysed elite discourse as being more strongly impeded in the Iran–Azerbaijan case than in the Iran–Uzbekistan one by the legacies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—however present they may be in both post-Soviet republics. This is, at least in part, due to decades of Soviet rule over Central Asia having paradoxically conserved elements of the local traditional culture.<sup>611</sup> Generational change in Azerbaijani-speaking parts of the South Caucasus and Iran may change this: The younger generation in the former is becoming less-rigidly secular in outlook, all while admittedly being much more likely to

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<sup>611</sup> See Kandiyoti, Deniz. “The Politics of Gender and the Soviet Paradox: Neither Colonized, Nor Modern?” *Central Asian Survey*, 26(4) 2007: 601-623.

have studied in the West than their peers in Tashkent—while the younger generation in Iran’s northwestern provinces is becoming more secular—not unlike the situation in the rest of Iran—but arguably, in part, also more ethnonationalistically-minded and more strongly attached to Turkey as a role model. The divergent attitudes specifically between the older generation of interviewees socialized in the Soviet era and the younger generation of elite interviewees in Baku—most of whom received their higher education in Europe and the US—carry deep long-term implications.

A conspicuous section of the overview chapter of this piece of research was devoted to the discursive use of the ‘regional player–extraregional player’ dichotomy in centres of foreign-policy decisionmaking in Tehran, as well as the lacking shared intersubjective understanding of the latter dichotomy outside of Iran’s borders. While its legitimizing function has already been subjected to a critical examination, it needs to be highlighted just how conspicuously Tashkent elites resort to an analogous delineation placing their country at the very centre. While not outright seeking to exclude ‘extraregional players’ from Central Asian affairs, Tashkent’s foreign policy places a conceptual priority on the five neighbouring ‘-stans’, including the non-ex-Soviet Afghanistan. The manner of defining one’s own’ region is therefore highly contingent on the expediency of geography as well as a given country’s regional ambitions. The same logic of self-perception and political expediency that includes Uzbekistan in Tehran’s regionalist calculations conversely excludes Iran from Tashkent’s own immediate neighbourhood. In analogy to the way French opinion polls indicate that a plurality of respondents deem the European Union a power multiplier for the French

Republic—i.e. a ‘functional territorial extension’ of the French Republic<sup>612</sup>—Uzbekistan’s elites see Central Asia as a relevant unit of analysis for Tashkent’s power projection beyond the confines of its own sub-region. A constructivist IR understanding has more predictive power in this respect than alternative theoretical frameworks.

An area of apparent alignment between Baku and Tashkent is wishing to see Iran relieved of the bulk of international—largely US-led—sanctions. This, again, seems to be the case for divergent reasons. My Baku respondents deem Iran a ‘regrettably unavoidable’ entity, if only just on grounds of geographical proximity and a long shared border, its sheer economic potential, and its military strength. Iran’s economy being severely destabilized by various packages of sanctions and the resulting international isolation—an ultimately ‘futile effort’, I am told, as far as the sanctions’ explicit and implicit goals are concerned—will also inflict collateral damage on the economy of the Republic of Azerbaijan. In Tashkent, it is more the notion of said sanctions eventually backfiring that is emphasized. This was ostensibly the case of Uzbekistan’s neighbour Turkmenistan having wholly reoriented its hydrocarbon-export economy towards China, following thwarted early efforts to ‘redirect the flow’ of its natural gas westwards—either via Iran or over the Caspian seabed. The former project was undermined by US resolve to exclude Iran from hydrocarbon connectivity—pursuing Central Asia–South Asia and Central Asia–South Caucasus energy links instead—while the latter case still faces joint Russo-Iranian opposition.<sup>613</sup> All of this ultimately benefitted China—Washington’s emerging-superpower adversary—the most. The latter

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<sup>612</sup> Cautrès, Bruno; Chopin, Thierry; Riviève, Emmanuel. “Les Français et l’Europe: Entre défiance et ambivalence –L’indispensable « retour de l’Europe en France »” [The French and Europe: Between defiance and ambivalence, the indispensable return of Europe in/to France]. *Rapport de recherche N°119*, 2020: 6-8, 40-41.

<sup>613</sup> Russian business interests admittedly weaken the Kremlin’s resolve in this area.

outcome thereby clearly warrants the aforementioned label of ‘backfiring’. In the case of the Tashkent elite interlocutors, there is a stronger current of thought, at least compared to Baku, that anticipates Iran’s precipitous economic rise on the long-term horizon, to the benefit of the wider region.

It is also among the interviewees in Uzbekistan where there is a more acute awareness of Tehran’s ‘self-restraint’ in Central Eurasia, ostensibly informed in part by its unwillingness to even remotely antagonize—most notably in the energy sphere—the Russian Federation. This is paradoxically in the sub-regional context of Central Asia, where Tehran had been forced to sacrifice comparatively less and cede fewer energy concessions to Russia than in the sub-region of the South Caucasus (see pages 57-58). Tehran subsuming its South-Caucasus and its—arguably even more so—Central-Asia ‘dossier’ under its strategically-more-important-relationship agenda with Moscow has been a *leitmotif* throughout the post-USSR-collapse period. This has, so far, shown to be even more pronounced of a trend with Russia’s February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. This, combined with ongoing US resolve to squeeze Iran out of global energy markets, will make Iran’s material connectivity with its neighbours—namely the type transporting hydrocarbon energy resources—further suffer as a result.

Regardless of whether this will end up being vindicated in the long-term, there is equal consensus in Baku, Tashkent, and Tehran that major Asian-rising-power-backed material connectivity initiatives along the east–west and the north–south axes are complete ‘game-changers’. Whether it be the China-backed Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), or the India-backed International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC), virtually all of the South Caucasus and Central Asia stand to benefit from the resulting closer material ‘link-up’ with the Iranian plateau. For Baku, this would be the case as

soon as the remaining Rasht–Astara leg of the INSTC is completed. Excessive optimism needs to be nonetheless tempered, in light of the ongoing unprecedented Russia-targeting sanctions, some of which are also aimed at the Russian Railways (*RŽD*).<sup>614</sup> After all, this iteration of north–south Eurasia-spanning connectivity hinges on Russia both as a target market, as well as a transit country before given goods can reach the massive European common market. For Tashkent, this is the case of the admittedly-in-a-much-earlier-stage-of-planning BRI railway section between Kashgar—China’s westernmost city located in the province of Xinjiang—and Andijan—the capital of the easternmost region of Uzbekistan—via Kyrgyzstan. Unlike Uzbekistan, the Republic of Azerbaijan is actively pursuing transport corridors that run counter to Iran’s strategic interests, such as the aforementioned ‘Middle Corridor’ (parts of which got retroactively subsumed under the BRI framework) and the Zangezur corridor. This indicates a more-pronounced zero-sum logic of material connectivity in Iran’s northwestern neighbourhood, compared to its northeastern neighbourhood.

## II) Generalizability of the chosen two case studies to the rest of Central Eurasia

### *A) Generalizability in space*

The INSTC and the BRI are initiatives large enough in their scope to render any material-connectivity-based conceptualization of Iran–Azerbaijan and Iran–Uzbekistan relations that remains circumscribed solely to the aforementioned two dyads inherently

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<sup>614</sup> Mammadov, Mahammad. “With Russia and Iran sanctioned, Middle Corridor has a chance to establish itself as a viable route in the East-West trade”. *Topchubashov Center*, 15 March 2022. URL: [top-center.org/en/analytics/3348/with-russia-and-iran-sanctioned-middle-corridor-has-a-chance-to-establish-itself-as-a-viable-route-in-the-east-west-trade](https://top-center.org/en/analytics/3348/with-russia-and-iran-sanctioned-middle-corridor-has-a-chance-to-establish-itself-as-a-viable-route-in-the-east-west-trade)

reductive. In case of the former relationship, Azerbaijan does not have large amounts of ‘tradeables’ to sell to Iran and *vice versa*. The ‘game-changing’ element the INSTC is in relation to larger—more lucrative—markets and sources of investment further afield, beyond the confines of Iran and Central Eurasia. In case of the latter relations, the unavoidable geographic reality of Uzbekistan not sharing a border with Iran by default implicates the transit country of Turkmenistan, alongside the prospect—albeit still a very fraught one—of Afghanistan serving as an additional transit country for Iran—Uzbekistan material connectivity congealing on the horizon. Due to the fact, discussed earlier, that the commercial viability of one specific Eurasian overland route may well be to the detriment of alternative routes or sections, it is always the wider region that is inadvertently involved.

Regional trends of material connectivity also show just how erratic can a specific transport corridor project be, as illustrated by the talks—discussed in the Baku-fieldwork-based chapter—of New Delhi being reportedly at one point amenable to a rerouting that would utilize Armenia’s territory in the envisaged INSTC north–south rail transport connectivity, to the clear detriment of Azerbaijan. It is also illustrated by the fact that there is zero-sum competition in the BRI context between—on the one hand—a Kazakhstan–Azerbaijan–Georgia ‘Middle Corridor’ multimodal axis of east–west connectivity and—on the other hand—a likely future fully-overland Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan–Turkmenistan–Iran axis.<sup>615</sup> The advantage of the former section is in traversing three, rather than four, countries—none of which are under a major sanctions regime—before both routes link up in Turkey, while the prospective advantage of the latter would be in traversing the demographic and economically-productive core of

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<sup>615</sup> This is rendered more salient by the decreased attractiveness of the so-called New Eurasian Land Bridge, in the context of anti-Russia sanctions.

Central Asia, as well in the lack of choke-points stemming from the necessity to move containers onto and off Caspian-traversing vessels. That being said, little is preventing China from also using the fully-overland Kazakhstan–Turkmenistan–Iran route, or the multimodal Kazakhstan–Turkmenistan–Azerbaijan–Georgia one, should existing infrastructure be upgraded. This abundance of alternatives renders the competition between the two previously-mentioned prospective east–west routes less acute.

The large difference between the material and immaterial connectivity shared between—on the one hand—the South Caucasus and Iran and—on the other hand—Central Asia and Iran is that, in the latter case, the two types of connectivity are inversely correlated. After decades of efforts to fully integrate Iran’s transport networks with the Soviet-era one, geographical distance tends to now serve as the best predictor of relevance of material connectivity. Yet only in the South Caucasus does the salience of immaterial connectivity correlate in an analogous fashion.<sup>616</sup> The Central Asian countries neighbouring Iran, through either overland or maritime links—such as Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan respectively—tend to have less immaterial connectivity binding them to the Iranian plateau, in comparison to Uzbekistan and in particularly-stark contrast to the conspicuously remote and only-accessible-with-great-difficulty Republic of Tajikistan. The historical, topographical and ethnolinguistic reasons for this are discussed in the overview chapter, but if one were to abridge the relevant sections it would be a question of asserting that remote mountain valleys and dense urban cores of Central Asia were historically more conducive to the preservation of New Persian and of Persianate culture than the deserts and the steppe that cover most of the sub-region’s total land area.

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<sup>616</sup> Christian-majority Armenia is a more complex case, given the Iranian view that it cannot be part of the same coherent ‘Iranian-Islamic civilization’.



This puts Iran in a situation where its two Central Asian neighbours (if one includes Kazakhstan's presence in the opposite quadrant of the Caspian) are among the republics that are the least likely to struggle to reconcile the perceived (i.e. intersubjective) historical role of Iran and Persian culture in their own understanding of themselves as a nation. In practical terms this means—once it became clear that the Islamic Republic will not seek to 'export the revolution'—a full commitment to *Realpolitik* and a purely economically-driven cost-benefit analysis. For an examination of these regional relationships dyads—which also include Iran's relations with further-afield Kyrgyzstan and Georgia—a more conventional IR approach would generally suffice, rather than the comparatively-more-complexity-intercepting constructivist one employed here. In short, there is not enough immaterial connectivity to interfere with nationbuilding or to impact foreign policy. As a consequence there is also a general lack of a meaningful dialectic between the 'material' and the 'immaterial' dimensions of connectivity in the case of Iran's bilateral relations with Georgia, Armenia, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. In the case of the Tajikistan 'outlier', there are conversely so few elements of material connectivity with Iran that this equally impedes a productive dialectic between the material and the immaterial as a result.

The aforementioned republics of Armenia and Tajikistan have both played a key role for much of the trajectory of contemporary Iran–Central Eurasia relations. The caveat is that this role has not been played independently, but rather in relation to the broader regional crises that Iran sought to mediate from the early 1990s onwards, as well as subordinate functions of the more complex—and arguably-more meaningful

from a foreign-policy standpoint—Tehran–Baku and Tehran–Tashkent relationships.<sup>617</sup> As long as a final settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the associated Zangezur dispute is not fully reached, Yerevan’s primary role will continue to be—in the eyes of foreign-policy elites in Tehran—as one of the angles of the ‘Tehran–Baku–Yerevan zero-sum triangle’. Any improvement of bilateral relations on one of its sides will likely be to the detriment of the remaining two sides and *vice versa*. If one were to make inferences from fieldwork and from the available literature, the analogous Tehran–Tashkent–Dushanbe triangle has already dissolved in connection with the death of Uzbekistan’s president Islam Karimov in 2016 and with the subsequent shift towards a less confrontational regional policy on the side of Uzbekistan under president Mirziyoyev. This was the main finding of this research that succeeded in refuting a prior assumption of mine espoused for much of my doctoral research period, namely that of the supposedly-perennial nature of these triangular dynamics.

Since then, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have been engaged in repeated border skirmishes and are currently the main twin obstacles to Central Asian regionalism. This would surprise a specialist observer even five years prior who would have likely been predicting Turkmenistan to pursue its traditional role of ‘the biggest spoiler of regionalist initiatives in Central Asia’. While Uzbekistan’s elites had long seen themselves as the main drivers of regionalism in Central Asia, this had been done using the ‘stick’, rather than the ‘carrot’ up to the mid-2010s. This also explains why Uzbekistan’s relations with Iran were only rarely analysed by the interviewed elite in Tashkent in 2022 on a *prima facie* basis, but were instead filtered through the

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<sup>617</sup> The latter two are themselves largely a subordinate function of the strategic Tehran–Moscow relationship.

endogenous prism of the long-coveted Central-Asian-regional-leadership role envisioned for the republic.

*B) Generalizability in time*

Aside from two circumscribed country-case studies, another potential shortcoming of having based the empirical core of this doctoral dissertation—one examining the medium-term trends in Iran–Central Eurasia relations—on a *de facto* snapshot of the ‘2021–2022 regional state of affairs’ and elite intersubjective understanding thereof. Aside from needing to triangulate the main takeaways—if only just in terms of the hostile-but-rapidly-evolving alternation of talks with military confrontations between Armenia and Azerbaijan—one also had to take likely ‘presentist bias’ into account. Furthermore, the fact that no Baku interlocutors would spend any time addressing the issue of Caspian delineation, treating it instead as a *fait accompli*, should not obscure the fact that it used to be one of the primary sources of tension between Tehran and Baku for much of the post-independence period. Even with all of this accounted for, I can affirm that the past near-decade corresponded to a singular second wave of proliferation of material connectivity along the Iran–Central Eurasia axis. The first wave had been the first half-decade of independence between 1991 and 1996, culminating in the well-attended inauguration of the Mashhad–Sarakhs–Tejen rail link, which has most prominently ‘opened’ the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas to Central Asian freight. This early period included the setting up of official diplomatic ties and trade relations, ECO enlargement, and the inception of the practice of hydrocarbon swap agreements. The two decades between 1996 and 2016 were marked by a spirit of ‘business as usual’ and a degree of stagnation as far as the expansion of material connectivity was concerned. The start of the current and ongoing ‘second wave’ of material connectivity

proliferation can be traced back to the 2014 inauguration of the Etrek–Incheh Borun railway link within the framework of the aforementioned Ashgabat Agreement (see pages 68-69), but it is ultimately defined, first and foremost, by the injection of Indian and Chinese (and perhaps also Russian) funding to enable the development of the Chabahar deep water port, the outlying Rasht–Astara railway, and physical links beyond the borders of Iran further afield that nevertheless promise to render Iran a more attractive and more-economically-viable transit country. In retrospect, the 2021–2022 fieldwork period will be considered an exceptionally auspicious one in terms of enabling the recognition of the aforementioned second wave of much-intensified Iran–Central Eurasia relations. The latter has been concentrated principally in the area of infrastructure development, but has also been enabling some ‘spillover’ to other areas of bilateral and multilateral relations. As is shown in the fieldwork data, both new prospects and actual completion of game-changing material connectivity with Iran tends to also draw more attention and raise additional awareness among the national elites of the Central Eurasian republics to the comparatively much older pre-existing immaterial connectivity that their countries and societies share with Iran. Depending on the political expediency of the moment, the elites in Baku and Tashkent may subsequently perpetuate hegemonic national discourse that downplays these immaterial links, or reframes them in ways that effectively neutralize the latter.

### **III) Answering research questions and corroborating the research hypothesis**

The most recent explicit formulation of the dissertation's research questions was all the way back in the introductory chapter. The body of the following chapters sought to answer these throughout their constituent sections. The research questions nevertheless warrant an explicit restatement here, as well as an informed endeavour to tackle each in turn. The first research question was:

*Did the recent proliferation of relevant regional infrastructure projects put Iran more acutely on the radar of the academic and foreign-policy elite in the national capitals of post-Soviet Central Eurasia? In what ways?*

An analysis of the elite discourse collated throughout 2021–2022 fieldwork in Baku and Tashkent respectively leads one to the conclusion that, had Iran not played a crucial role in facilitating the logistical supplies of Azerbaijan's Nakhchivan exclave—as well as offering the shortest route for doubly-landlocked Uzbekistan to the 'open seas'—one could easily envisage an inferior degree of conceptual and political engagement with Iran on the side of the respective republics' elites. One could similarly scarcely envision the same interest in Baku and Tashkent in creating and maintaining a working relationship with the Islamic Republic and in associating with regional schemes such as ECO, however moribund the organization may have shown to be in the decades following its early-1990s revitalization and enlargement. Similarly, there would have not been the same ever-growing awareness of the sheer salience of immaterial connectivity that exists between these countries and Iran. These links had been purposefully downplayed throughout the Soviet era. The immaterial connectivity

continues to be obfuscated—in qualitatively distinct ways—in major aspects of Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan’s own ongoing nationbuilding processes. For individual country-cases in the remainder of Central Eurasia, conclusive evidence falls outside of the scope of the present research project, yet one can make inferences from the available literature suggesting an analogous phenomenon. The differences between, on the one hand, the two republics that were studied more in depth<sup>618</sup> and, on the other hand, those that were not is that the latter group’s relations with Iran are either much more ‘pedestrian’ and informed by pragmatic considerations—as is the case with Armenia, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan—or are barely affected by the current wave of overland-connectivity proliferation, as tended to be the case in Tajikistan (with Georgia and Kyrgyzstan occupying an intermediate position). In the former, border-sharing group a growing awareness of Iran’s regional interests and economic potential would not necessarily translate into much beyond yet another—admittedly better-informed—cost-benefit analysis.

*What informs the way Iran’s ‘immaterial-connectivity-centring overtures’ are received in Central Eurasia?*

As has been proposed, there is a gradient ranging from republics such as Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan—where such cultural overtures seem to have no meaningful effect beside minor annoyance when too overstated or bombastic, or a tepid embracing, in case of ‘reasonably-anodyne’ initiatives, such as the joint bid to have Nauruz declared Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by the United Nations—to Azerbaijan on the opposite extreme end, where similar overtures are associated (rightly or wrongly) with a

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<sup>618</sup> The explanatory value of these two case studies is in just how similar the ‘inputs’ when juxtaposed with the dramatically-divergent outcomes, in terms of their respective relations with Iran.

desire by Iran to gain a foothold in the country for nefarious reasons. In the early-Karimov era, Uzbekistan used to occupy the same place as the Republic of Azerbaijan, but the country has since moved much closer to a ‘moderate mid-point’ between the two extremes. In both studied cases, it can be one’s precarious hold onto what it means to an Azerbaijani or an Uzbek(istani)—fully justified given the still ongoing nationbuilding process—that causes specific instances of Iranian appeals to an ostensible Iranian-Islamic civilizational affinity to backfire. These instances of Iranian representatives staking historical and cultural claims, however overstated, producing strong resistance on the post-Soviet side of the equation should be seen as sign of fragility of national constructs on the northern side of the border, rather than one of national self-assuredness. The difference is that Uzbekistan’s nationbuilding, and Central Asia’s more broadly, is—and has been so since the early-Soviet era—a quest to find and magnify elements of national distinctiveness to set one apart, first and foremost, from one’s post-Soviet Central Asian neighbours. Unlike the situation in Baku, Iran is largely an afterthought in Tashkent, as well as in much of Central Asia.

A supporting question: *Does Iran rely on a coherent regional policy towards its immediate post-Soviet neighbourhood?*

There does not seem to be anything resembling a ‘coherent policy vision’ on the side of the Islamic Republic *vis-à-vis* Central Eurasia. Iran’s foreign policy in Eurasia has shown a track record of reactive, rather than proactive approaches. Even in instances where Tehran gained considerable regional prestige—such as when it served as the main co-mediator of the internal armed conflict in Tajikistan—there did not appear to be anything resembling a ‘policy roadmap’ dictating the steps to undertake beforehand. There are some vague general guiding principles of the foreign policy of the Islamic

Republic, such as prioritizing ties with ostensibly-Muslim countries—which may explain lower or zero engagement with Armenia and Georgia within the framework of specific regional agendas. Another determinant factor of Tehran’s ‘northern policy vector’ has been the specific historical juncture of when said approaches were implemented: The collapse of the USSR generally coincided with the ascendant Hashemi-Rafsanjani presidency marking a major shift towards pragmatism. The latter was informed by the death of the Islamic Republic’s founder, as well as by the post-Iran–Iraq-war exhaustion and related desire to rebuild the country. The contemporaneous constitutional amendments also introduced the consultative body of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), where specific non-monopolized *ad hoc* policy approaches would be refined by means of dialogue and negotiation between the various institutional factions existing within the institutionally-factionalized Iranian state. This explains why Tehran’s policy has been largely pragmatic and non-ideological—in stark contrast to policy agendas *vis-à-vis* much of the Persian Gulf, the Levant, and Afghanistan, which were formulated in the early years of the revolution and are generally more-closely beholden to the IRGC—its Quds Force—and to the Office of the Supreme Leader.

The last step involves tackling the hypothesis, its corroboration undertaking having necessitated much of the empirical chapters of this dissertation, but not more explicitly and overtly addressed prior to this point:

*Much of the developments endogenous to Iran–Central Eurasia relations that cannot be accounted for on grounds of purely material considerations can be instead explained by Iran’s own ‘civilizational’ self-image and by some of the post-Soviet republics’*



*consequent poor receptiveness to Iran's overtures—this apprehension itself being a product of fraught ongoing nationbuilding processes.*

Iran's approaches to Central Eurasia are very much informed by the intersubjective understanding of 'natural levels' of its economic and cultural influence having been ostensibly 'distorted' by decades of foreign meddling and the associated distortion of local post-independence elite preferences. This ambition is, in part, constrained by the continued deference that Tehran pays to Moscow, only now paradoxically further exacerbated by Russia's recent pariah status and international isolation. When it comes specifically to Iran and Central Eurasia, the main issue is the stark mismatch between expectations on either side of the ex-Soviet border. On its 'northern side', Iran is just 'one of many' regional states—alongside (depending on the specific vantage point) Turkey, Pakistan, India and China—that can now, over the course of the more than three decades that have transpired since the collapse of the USSR, and ever since the end of the associated geopolitical division of Eurasia, develop the semi-acknowledged pre-existing immaterial ties, alongside growing-in-prominence material ones. Iran's outsized enthusiasm is curbed locally. This applies the most to the case of the Republic of Azerbaijan, where a decision had been made—very early into the statebuilding and nationbuilding process—to emulate the Turkish ethnolinguistic 'kin-state', all while downplaying considerable pre-existing immaterial links with Iran, including—since the abrupt end of the short-lived ethnonationalist-fervour-filled Elchibey presidency—the self-evident kinship links to Iranian Azerbaijan. This downgrading and downplaying of the immaterial links shared with Iran was facilitated by the mutual realization that generations of divergent political and social developments had created a rift of understanding along the Aras River that is much greater than the awareness of common

ancestry and a shared command of Azerbaijani Turkish would have led one to anticipate.

An analogous discursive pattern is less pronounced in the Republic of Uzbekistan. While immaterial links with Iran are present and apparent, the prevailing imperative in Uzbekistan's nationbuilding and its way of consolidating regional relationships has been via filtering the latter through its own perceived role of regional leader, with the curious and conspicuous inclusion of non-post-Soviet Afghanistan. The historical and linguistic links with the Iranian plateau, as they are described in Tehran, are alternatively reframed in Tashkent—often not incorrectly—as endogenous to Transoxiana and therefore not intrinsically 'Iranian'. The only present-day domestic phenomenon that is seen in Tashkent as meriting the latter qualifier is—and even that only to a limited extent—that of Uzbekistan's own *Eroniy* Shias. The imperatives of Central Asian nationbuilding still prioritize an emphasis on difference over an emphasis on similarity. In this respect, Iran is not being 'maliciously singled out by the Uzbeks'. These nationbuilding exigencies nevertheless have clear implications on the downplaying of the aforementioned immaterial connectivity with Iran—though this may well change as these processes are generally slowing down, due to their relatively-advanced current degree of consolidation. Once the latter decelerates even further, it is not unreasonable to expect more head-on and more earnest engagement with the immaterial connectivity linking Central Eurasia to Iran in South Caucasian and Central Asian capitals. Again, this is a sliding scale, where such immaterial links—however admittedly weaker in comparison to Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan—in Armenia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan never had much of a

bearing on national self-conceptualization and, by extension—in line with a more conventional IR logic—on regional policy.

#### **IV) Concluding remarks and discussion of avenues for future research**

The contribution of this present piece of research has been in examining the relevance of connectivity, be it material—i.e. physical infrastructure—or immaterial—i.e. shared conceptual links, historical memory and the like—and the interplay between them in two specific Eurasian bilateral relationship dyads. The decision to subscribe to a constructivist research epistemology proved justified—even more so after the fieldwork’s completion—by the fact that the Baku and Tashkent cases have proven to be effectively the most ambivalent, complex and ‘intersubjectively rich’ *vis-à-vis* Tehran of all other constituent bilateral regional dyads of the entire Iran–Central Eurasia regional nexus. Furthermore, the relative similarity of the two case studies offers more space for interpretation on the few metrics where the two countries differ. These differences—such as Shiism versus Sunnism, the differing sub-regional dynamics of the South Caucasus versus those of Central Asia, as well as the personal idiosyncrasies of current national leadership—account for a large portion of the divergent outcomes (i.e. the Tehran–Baku relationship being overall much more fraught than the Tehran–Tashkent one). One particularity of the ‘republics of the former-Soviet South’ has been the still relatively-recent and ongoing nationbuilding process—something a casual Western European or North American observer does not necessarily have the opportunity to observe at home in real time, despite his or her own country’s nationbuilding processes not having been inherently any less ‘artificial’ than those in

Central Eurasia—and varying degrees of willingness to accept or downplay the role of Iran, and of Persian culture more broadly, in their own respective ethnogeneses. This piece of research examines ways in which discrete formerly-coherent geographic areas, defined by shared security considerations and broadly-shared culture, can be broken down and the existing immaterial links that had been binding them together obfuscated in light of major geopolitical shifts, such as the Great Game and the Cold War. More scholarly attention has been paid to the case of Central Europe. This piece of research is a singular contribution seeking to look at analogous developments of joining and disjoining further east along the former Cold War-era fault line.

A plausible future research avenue can be opened to a more in-depth examination of elite perspectives in Tehran and to a critical analysis of national discourse generated *in situ* in real time, akin to that done here for Baku and Tashkent in this piece of research. For various reasons, I was not able to carry out full-fledged fieldwork in Iran and conduct the long-coveted elite interviews over the course of the doctoral research period. Consequently, I had to ‘make do’ with an array of primary sources that would fulfil a surrogate function *vis-à-vis* live Iranian elite discourse. The likely scholarly value of two-or-three months of fieldwork in Tehran on this very research topic is nonetheless impossible to deny.

Another viable doctoral-dissertation-scale undertaking would be the introduction of a parallel comparative dimension *vis-à-vis* Ankara. Conspicuous analogous elements of the aforementioned immaterial connectivity also exist—as was asserted from the dissertation’s very inception—between Turkey and Central Eurasia. Conversely, a partial shift away from material connectivity would be required, at least in the case of Central Asia, which lacks any territorial contiguity with Anatolia. On the flipside, more

research could be devoted to trade and investment, as Turkey's economic footprint in Central Eurasia on the whole vastly outstrips that of the Islamic Republic of Iran. To compensate for the deficiencies of material connectivity with Central Asia, immaterial connectivity, namely the Turkic linguistic factor, would take centre stage, epitomized by the institutionally-still-expanding Organization of Turkic States. One major challenge to tackle would be accounting for the surprisingly weak—once you remove language from the equation, and in spite of what pan-Turkist discourse asserts—cultural links, specifically those of a 'civilizational nature', that Turkey shares with faraway Central Asian republics such as Kyrgyzstan.

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