

## IRANIAN-TURKMEN RELATIONS IN AN ERA OF CHANGE

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In the fifteen years that have passed since the U.S.S.R. collapsed, the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) has gained sufficiently diversified experience in bilateral relations with the newly independent states that formed in the place of the former Union republics. One of the primary things to be noted about the IRI's relations with the Central Asian states is the fact that Iran was one of the first countries to recognize their independence and establish equal relations with them. Over the past fifteen years, every version of interstate relations has acquired its own specifics and its own set of particular stratifications and ad hoc characteristics in the Central Asian expanse, which are interfering with the progressive development of a dialog.

In this context, Iranian-Turkmen relations can quite rightly be called the most stable and dynamic. Throughout the fifteen years of their existence, they have proven the strength of the potential invested in them. This gave reason for deceased President Saparmurat Niyazov to say the following in 2003 in his famous speech *How Difficult It Is to Build a State*: "We have fraternal relations with the Iranian people, devoid of mutual suspicion." This description very adequately reflects the current reality of the Central Asian region. Iranian-Turkmen relations have almost no features that irritate either participant in the dialog, and restraining counterbalances are kept to the minimum. This makes the problematic aspects of the IRI's interrelations with other countries of

this region stand out in sharp relief. For example, Iran's relations with Kazakhstan are aggravated by Astana's desire to focus priority attention on the pro-Western and pro-Russian vectors of its foreign policy. Recently, a pro-Chinese bent has become increasingly crystallized in its predilections. The hypertrophied fear that bilateral relations might be used as a channel to export the ideas of Islamic fundamentalism is taking its toll on Tashkent's relations with Tehran. Iran's negative emotions about Dushanbe's extensive military cooperation with the West and Russia are being sloughed off on cooperation with Tajikistan,

which is presented by the Iranian mass media as the most sincere in terms of ethnic communality. The same motive is complicating relations with Kyrgyzstan, which, however, have been acquiring obvious dynamism recently, this being explained by Bishkek's desire to reduce military cooperation with the U.S. to the minimum. As for Turkmenistan's interrelations with the IRI, they are being built exclusively on the basis of the economic expediency that is increasingly affirmed in the world today and with almost complete disregard for the political discrepancies that arise from time to time.

## Special Features of Iranian-Turkmen Relations

The main feature of Iranian-Turkmen interrelations is that the mutual involvement of both countries is based on the fact they have no other choice. Both states are destined to have active bilateral relations. Turkmenistan's new head Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov confirmed this again on 8 March, 2007 in a telephone conversation with the Iranian president.<sup>1</sup> Iran and Turkmenistan are united by an extensive common border, to which four of the five regions of the latter are contiguous, as well as many centuries of historical, confessional, and civilizational proximity. The territory of present-day Turkmenistan has often been part of historical Iran, and the capital of legendary Iranian-speaking Parthia—Nisa—was located near the present-day Turkmen capital.

By developing relations with Turkmenistan, Iran is primarily pursuing rather pragmatic goals—strengthening its position in the region and drawing maximum benefit both from the huge supplies of hydrocarbons in the neighboring republic and from its convenient geopolitical position at the crossroads of transit routes. Another important factor of good-neighborly relations is the presence of a large Turkmen population in the north of the IRI, which has largely retained kindred ties on the other side of the border. With respect to this, we will note that neither country has tried to use the ethnic factor in the political game during these years, as is the case, for example, in the relations between Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan.

It is also important that both states can equally be considered rogue states. For Iran this was due to the confrontational policy of the religious leaders, who have raised an outstanding number of countries against them—both in the neighboring geopolitical space and throughout the world. Since 2005, after the neo-conservatives came to power in the IRI headed by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the state's isolation has become even more aggravated. The unresolved state of the Iranian nuclear problem is prompting the world community to introduce political and economic sanctions, which is undermining the country's prestige on the international arena. In our day and age, friendship with Iran is not always seen as beneficial and prompts statements such as, "Who wants to cut itself off

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<sup>1</sup> See: "The Presidents of Iran and Turkmenistan Confirm Their Resolve to Intensify and Expand Cooperation in All Spheres," available at [mehrnews.com], 8 March, 2007 (in Farsi).

from the comforts of the Western civilization along with Iran?”<sup>2</sup> Turkmenistan’s isolation in the contemporary world was due to the unprecedented totalitarian trends, which were subsequently aggravated by deceased President Saparmurat Niyazov, his regime’s gross violation of human rights, complete neglect of democracy, and the terrible crimes against his own people. But these circumstances in no way influence interstate interrelations and the IRI and Turkmenistan hardly bat an eyelid over them.

All these years, Iranian-Turkmen relations have been demonstrating Iran’s significant potential in rendering comprehensive assistance to the newly independent states of the post-Soviet space. A contractual-legal basis of cooperation has been drawn up and is working effectively. It consists of approximately 150 contracts and agreements in a wide range of areas, including mutual legal assistance to the citizens of both countries, a practice seldom encountered in world practice.<sup>3</sup> The stable domestic situation in each of the two republics is conducive to the development of transit operations through both Iran and Turkmenistan. The IRI has become one of Turkmenistan’s most important economic partners, currently occupying second place (after Russia) in the state’s trade turnover: during the past 15 years, its volumes increased from 52,000 dollars in 1992 to 1.4 billion dollars in 2006. The representative offices of more than 200 Iranian companies have opened in Turkmenistan. In so doing, according to a statement by the head of the Iranian Foreign Ministry Manouchehr Mottaki, which he made during a visit to Ashgabad in March 2007, the volumes of bilateral cooperation—particularly in such priority areas as power engineering, the oil and gas industry, and electric power generation—far from tap its entire potential.<sup>4</sup> Approximately 100 industrial facilities of immense importance to the national economy have gone into operation or are being put into operation in Turkmenistan with Iranian help. The targets of technical-economic cooperation with Iran have made it possible for Turkmenistan to acquire the most contemporary technology—particularly in high-tech, communications, building materials, medications, and chemical water purification, to name a few. Iranian assistance in creating a transportation infrastructure is also highly appraised in Turkmenistan. The Tejen-Serakhs-Mashhad railroad, which went into operation in May 1996, opened up the shortest route for the country to the Middle East and put the Great Silk Road back into operation. Since 1998, 14 million tons of freight have been shipped along this route, which added 218 billion dollars to the republic’s treasury. This project’s success boosted the two countries’ continued cooperation in the transportation sphere. At the end of November 2006, the IRI government approved of Iran joining the international project for building a trans-Asian railroad. This is creating a contractual-legal basis for intensifying Iranian-Turkmen partnership in the transportation sphere.

The oil and gas industry has been a priority area in cooperation between the two states: Iran has become the main importer of Turkmen oil. Its share reached 52% as early as 1997 and continues to increase every year. In July 1998, the first agreement on the transportation of Turkmen oil to the Iranian ports of the Persian Gulf was signed. Iranian companies participated in surveying and boring wells after winning several international tenders. Cooperation with the IRI in the gas sphere is developing more intensively. It has opened up broad opportunities for Turkmenistan to export gas to this country and created the possibility of transporting it by transit through Iran to the states of the Mediterranean and Europe, as well as via Iranian ports in the Persian Gulf—to the Far Eastern and Southeast Asian regions. The Iranian corridor also has political significance for Turkmenistan: it made it possible to put an end to Russia’s monopoly on the transit of Turkmen blue fuel and to gain access to a market beyond the post-Soviet expanse. Of extreme importance for Turkmenistan’s gas industry is the IRI’s

<sup>2</sup> See: O. Gushchin, “I ne drug, i ne vrag, a tak...” *Rossia*, 28 December, 2006-10 January, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> See: “The Mejlis Approved Three Agreements Between Iran and Turkmenistan and Tajikistan,” *ISNA*, 17 April, 2007 (in Farsi).

<sup>4</sup> See: “The New President of Turkmenistan Pledges Allegiance to the Previous Bilateral Agreements,” available at [<http://www.roshangari.net>], 17 March, 2007 (in Farsi).

assistance in laying the Korpeje–Kurt-Kui gas pipeline, 200 kilometers in length, which was put into operation in 1998 and is a main gas export route alternative to the Russian. In the beginning, it pumped 6 bcm a year, whereas by 2006 this amount had reached 12 bcm. But it will have to be further expanded since Iran would like to buy 14 bcm from its neighboring republic. The IRI provided 80% of the financing for building this gas pipeline and signed an obligation to purchase the transported fuel for 25 years. According to the official data, in 2007, 80 bcm of gas will be produced in the country, which is 20% higher than the previous year.<sup>5</sup> According to a statement by Turkmenistan's new president Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov, the growing volumes of gas production will make it possible to guarantee the contract deliveries of blue fuel to Iran. There are very real prospects in Turkmenistan for increasing gas production,<sup>6</sup> which is definitely arousing the IRI's interest. But with respect to gas transportation, the current Turkmenistan president is inclined toward upholding the idea of diversifying routes. Of course, this is reducing the possibility of Iranian transit. This is how the agreements reached on 12 May, 2007 on building the Caspian gas pipeline can be viewed. A joint declaration was signed at a meeting of the presidents of Russia, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan in the city of Turkmenbashi (on the eastern coast of the Caspian), on the basis of which it was decided to initiate trilateral cooperation to build an export route (construction will begin in the second half of 2008). The pipeline will pass for 360 km through Turkmenistan, 150 km through Kazakhstan, and then join up with the Central Asia-Center gas pipeline in operation since as early as Soviet times. It can be used to transport raw Turkmen hydrocarbons to the European markets. "The deal to build a pipeline along the Caspian Sea coast to ship Turkmen natural gas to Western markets via Kazakhstan and Russia is a blow to the U.S. and European countries' efforts to secure reliable sources of oil and gas outside the Middle East that also would be independent from Russian influence."<sup>7</sup> According to several publications in the Russian mass media, this is blocking the construction of an alternative, trans-Caspian gas pipeline bypassing the Russian Federation, the idea for which was put forward by Western countries, including the U.S.<sup>8</sup>

In Iran, this gas pipeline is regarded as "the end of the West's sweet dreams, which has been trying for the last few months to win over the sympathy of Saparmurat Niyazov's successor and incline him toward cooperating with the West in pipeline policy in order to squeeze out Russia."<sup>9</sup> By 2012, the new gas pipeline will reach a throughput capacity of 20 bcm, and its cost will amount to 1 billion dollars. But Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov is not rejecting the idea of the trans-Caspian gas pipeline lobbied by the West, believing it to be in keeping with the world trend toward diversifying routes for transporting energy resources.

Both countries are also cooperating in creating a common energy system. In 2003, a jointly-built power transmission line, which stretches between Balkanabat in Turkmenistan and Aliabad in Iran, went into operation. An agreement on deliveries of electric power to Iran was signed for 25 years and will bring Turkmenistan an annual revenue of 120 million dollars. Another power transmission line is being built—from Mary in Turkmenistan to Mashhad in Iran. When it goes into operation, the IRI will be able to receive 2.4 billion kWh annually from its neighboring republic. According to the results of 2006, Iran has become the largest importer of electric power from Turkmenistan: its share amounted to 55%.

The IRI is placing great importance on bilateral cooperation with Turkmenistan, characterizing it as exemplary. Strengthening friendly relations with its northern neighbor became one of the priority

<sup>5</sup> See: "Turkmenia vdvoe uvelichila postavki gaza v Iran," available at [iran.ru], 12 April, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> See: *Neytralniy Turkmenistan*, 3 April, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> "Russian, Central Asian Leaders Strike Crucial Natural Gas Pipeline Deal," *Associated Press*, 12 May, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> See: *Novye izvestia*, 14 May, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> "The End of the West's Dream About Possessing Central Asian Gas," available at [http://www.isna.ir], 13 May, 2007 (in Farsi).

areas in Iran's foreign policy. The leaders of the two countries made a habit of exchanging frequent visits. During the years of his presidency (1989-1997), Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani met with Saparmurat Niyazov 16 times. Sayed Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005), who replaced him in this post, made his first foreign visit to Ashgabad. The current (since August 2005) president of Iran Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whose conservative ideology goes essentially unnoticed in Ashgabad, made some changes in the republic's priorities and paid his first visit to Damascus. However, when he was in Turkmenistan during his first Central Asian tour in July 2006, he said that his state would not place any restrictions on the development of relations with Turkmenistan and also spoke in favor of making the fullest possible use of the cooperation potential of both countries.<sup>10</sup>

Iran regards stability on its northern borders as an indubitable advantage of good-neighborly relations. In light of the current instability in Iran's relations with its main foreign political foe, the U.S., head of the Center of International Research of the Iranian Foreign Ministry Rasul Musavi believes this component of the bilateral dialog to be a vital necessity for his republic, justifiably emphasizing that Iran did not find peaceful neighborly relations in the Middle East.<sup>11</sup> Turkmenistan's declaration of permanent neutrality, which is unprecedented in world practice, as the foundation of its foreign policy is of great rational interest to the IRI. Turkmenistan's purely pragmatic neutral status made it possible for its leader to successfully maneuver between the poles of power in today's world "...without being afraid of arousing the irritation of strong and authoritative America."<sup>12</sup> For Iran, it is also important that Turkmenistan's neutrality is a restraining factor that allows Ashgabad to distance itself from participation in international bloc structures. The documents of a symposium held in Tehran called "Turkmenistan After Saparmurat Niyazov" (January 2007), at which many Iranian political scientists spoke, expressed the hope that this special feature of Turkmenistan's supreme policy will not be reconsidered, since it meets Iran's national interests.

## This Strange Neutrality

Saparmurat Niyazov motivated the need for permanent neutrality by the fact that this would efficiently promote the country's economic progress and its dynamic integration into several developed countries of the world. Pursuing a policy of permanent neutrality made it possible for the president to avoid criticism from the rest of the world about his absolute personal power and suppression of the slightest manifestation of dissidence. In this respect, the Turkmen leader managed to essentially "close" the republic to the outside world by permitting only high-ranking leaders and businessmen to visit the country, as well as keeping the discussion of domestic political issues to a minimum. Iran, however, welcomed this international status of Turkmenistan, believing that the neutrality policy was the reason for the success of the talks held in Ashgabad between the participants of the Tajik peace process, which led to the signing of the 1997 Agreement, as well as of the talks with the leaders of the fundamentalist movement of the Afghan Taliban, which significantly promoted inter-Afghan settlement.

However, it was precisely over the Taliban regime that Iran and Ashgabad did not see politically eye to eye. At first, Saparmurat Niyazov supported the Northern Alliance opposed to the Taliban. The Iranian leaders fully supported him in this, who saw the Taliban as their rivals in the struggle for regional leadership. But as early as the fall of 1996, when the Taliban actually became the most

<sup>10</sup> See: "Po zakonam dobrososedstva," available at [turkmenistan.ru], 26 July, 2006.

<sup>11</sup> See: "Turkmenistan After Saparmurat Niyazov: Iran Hopes that Turkmenistan Will Continue the Policy of Neutrality," available at [isna.ir], 3 January, 2007 (in Farsi).

<sup>12</sup> O. Gushchin, op. cit.

influential military-political force in Afghanistan, Saparmurat Niyazov took steps toward rapprochement. Right up until 2001, while the world community was condemning the Taliban movement, the Turkmenistan president maintained constructive business ties with it and even opened a Consulate General in Herat—the most important center of Northwest Afghanistan. This was explained for economic reasons—in December 1997, Ashgabad signed a treaty on forming a consortium in order to lay a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to Pakistan through Afghanistan.

Ignoring the summit initiated by Iran and Russia to oppose the threat of the Taliban's enlargement into the Central Asian region, which was held in Almaty in October 1996, Turkmenistan juxtaposed itself to the policy of consent of those countries that regarded the Taliban as a threat to regional security. Saparmurat Niyazov justified his position by the fact that in his view the Taliban was that integrating and stabilizing force capable of overcoming Afghanistan's ethnic split. Taking economic priorities as a basis, Turkmenistan upheld the policy of establishing a dialog with the Taliban. In 1998, a trilateral commission was formed, in which the Taliban, Turkmenistan, and Pakistan participated in order to implement the gas pipeline project from the Turkmen field of Dauletabad to the Pakistan town of Multan through Afghanistan. The laying of this route would give Turkmenistan access to Pakistan's extensive market, and Afghanistan would receive significant transit revenue, as well as the possibility of partially resolving the problem of employment during the building of the gas pipeline. Pakistan could count on the prospect of guaranteed provision with energy resources for a long time to come. Of course, Iran had a negative attitude toward this project: its potential operation would have given rise to an alternative transportation artery that would not have met Iran's interests in light of the cooperation which had begun in those years to lay a major gas pipeline to India. But there is another explanation that justifies Turkmenistan's close ties with the Taliban. It was not to the republic's advantage to oppose the Taliban's forces, for this could destabilize the situation within the country. Rapprochement with the Taliban at that time nevertheless had an effect on the relations between Iran and Turkmenistan: there was a temporary slowdown in the rate of cooperation, and in 1998, the Iranian ambassador to Ashgabad was even recalled for a time.

## What Lies Ahead?

Iran in no way wanted its relations with Turkmenistan to deteriorate, viewing this country as a strategic partner. Turkmenbashi's clearly undemocratic methods of leadership and authoritative style of decision-making led to instability and a certain amount of rockiness in relations with the IRI, which the Iranian press noticed.<sup>13</sup> Tehran counted on Iranian territory possibly becoming the main export transit route to the world markets in the event that the Turkmen oil and gas industry successfully developed. At the same time, Turkmenistan was hardly inclined to overestimate cooperation prospects with Iran. The development of relations between Turkmenistan and the West, which was gaining momentum, will inevitably play the role of a restraining force in the Iranian-Turkmen dialog. In the short term, the West will try to keep rival Russian and Iranian influence to a minimum in this republic. In the West, the post-Niyazov period is viewed as a time of possible change. The current chairman of the OSCE, head of the Spanish Foreign Ministry Miguel Ángel Moratinos, has already expressed himself on this account, believing that gradual changes are happening in Turkmenistan and the dialog with its leadership should be stepped up.<sup>14</sup> With this in mind, the U.S. is drawing up a new cooperation pro-

<sup>13</sup> See: Salam (Iran), 24 April, 1999.

<sup>14</sup> See: "OSCE Chairman Encourages Turkmenistan to Intensify Cooperation with the Organization," available at [<http://gundogar.org>], 12 April, 2007.



gram with this country, which, in the words of Matthew Bryza, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, could become an absolutely new chapter in interrelations with Turkmenistan.<sup>15</sup> In particular, U.S. companies are indeed gaining a foothold on the agricultural technology market after signing long-term contracts for corresponding deliveries to Turkmenistan. A representative delegation of the Turkmenistan Ministry of Agriculture, which visited the U.S. in April, signed several contracts in this sphere. Representatives of American agricultural technology manufacturing companies met earlier with President Berdymukhammedov.

In the oil and gas sector—the foundation of the Turkmen economy—this could be expressed in the West's extensive investment participation in large-scale projects and the execution of export pipeline developments from Turkmenistan bypassing Iranian territory. In this context, cooperation has been designated with one of the world-renowned leaders in the oil and gas business—the American Chevron Company—a delegation of the leaders of which met in May 2007 with the Turkmenistan president and received an offer to review partnership issues in implementing projects on geological survey, oil refining, and the development of fields on the Caspian's Turkmen shelf. Reaching an agreement on the broad participation of large Saudi Arabian companies in investment activity with respect to the Turkmen oil and gas industry can be viewed in this same context.

Turkmenistan's new leadership does not plan to reject cooperation with Israel either, despite the Iran's extremely negative perception of this fact. For example, a large Israeli company, Merhav, will continue its many years of partnership with the Turkmen government. In the past, it performed the functions of a representative of the republic's government in several large oil and gas projects. During reconstruction of the Turkmenbashi complex of oil refining plants, Merhav was able to attract foreign investments amounting to 1.5 billion dollars. As of the present, Merhav is one of the two most influential foreign business groups in Turkmenistan.<sup>16</sup> On 27 March, 2007, the Turkmenistan president received the heads of the Israeli company and was presented with new proposals for activating Turkmen-Israeli cooperation. The Turkmenistan president himself stated at the meeting that he places his full trust in the company, seeing it as a reliable and time-tested partner.<sup>17</sup>

## After Saparmurat Niyazov's Death

Iran is closely following the latest changes in Turkmenistan's political life after the death of Saparmurat Niyazov. Local analysts do not think this sad event will have any significant effect on the continuation of Iranian-Turkmen partnership. In his letter of official condolences to Turkmenistan's acting president Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov, which was signed by the head of the Assembly of Experts Expediency Council, former Iranian president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani noted that it is to the deceased president's merit that bilateral relations are exemplary for the region's nations.<sup>18</sup> After officially taking office as president, Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov said in a conversation with Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki that his country would remain loyal to all the obligations it assumed in the past with respect to implementing bilateral agreements.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> See: "The U.S. Leadership Intends to Expand Cooperation with Turkmenia," available at [<http://gundogar.org>], 18 April, 2007.

<sup>16</sup> See: "Turkmenistan: vliiatel'naia izrail'skaia kompaniia 'Merhav' ostaetsia rabotat v strane," available at [<http://www.fergana.ru/news>], 28 March, 2007.

<sup>17</sup> See: *Neytralniy Turkmenistan*, 28 March, 2007.

<sup>18</sup> See: "Hashemi Rafsanjani Sends His Condolences to the Turkmenistan People," available at [[isna.ir](http://isna.ir)], 22 December, 2006 (in Farsi).

<sup>19</sup> See: "The New President of Turkmenistan Pledges Allegiance to the Previous Bilateral Agreements."

The Iranian mass media responded to the Turkmenistan president's death with a series of analytical publications which expressed concern about whether the post-Niyazov era would be as predictable as during the life of the deceased president. As the newspaper *Ayandeye no* believes, Saparmurat Niyazov's death would mean an immediate increase in rivalry between the two poles of power—Russia and the U.S.—for influence on the country's new political leadership. This, in the opinion of the newspaper, which reflects the views of the Iranian reformers, could acquire the nature of a latent war.<sup>20</sup> The newspaper *Ebtekar* relates Niyazov's sudden death to the beginning of a vague period in the republic's fate. According to the newspaper *Jawan*, the death of the Turkmen leader will give rise to many questions regarding the future of Iran's neighboring country, but would in no way influence the continuation of the bilateral dialog.

A few months after Niyazov's death, a publication appeared in the Iranian press about what the new political reality in Turkmenistan was like and how serious the changes occurring in the state were. The Mehr Information Agency noted in its comments that during the election campaign, Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov promised to continue the domestic and foreign policy conducted by the deceased president, but at the same time announced adherence to reforms in public health, national education, and "even the political system," where he intends to put an end to the one-party system inherited from Soviet times. One of Berdymukhammedov definite virtues is his willingness to get rid of the most odious symbols of Niyazov's personality cult, while strengthening his own private power. When talking about the republic's new leader, Mehr expressed surprise that he occupied a ministerial post for ten years. "It is nothing short of a miracle, because it was impossible to remain in the power elite for such a length of time in this Central Asian country, since all-powerful autocrat Turkmenbashi regularly weeded it out and sent high-ranking officials to prison or into exile."<sup>21</sup>

Among the analytical articles published in the Iranian mass media, we will note the information provided by Abuzar Ibrahim Torkman on the Iranian site [www.baztab.com]. The author believes that, in recent years, this small republic has undergone significant progress, moving up to the role of economic leader in Central Asia. "The deceased president imbibed a lost sense of national pride in the Turkmen people." Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov's nomination as Niyazov's successor, writes Torkman, saved the world community from concern about how radically this country's political course might change at the new historical stage. The author regards the alternative nature of the presidential election, the presence of six candidates who put forward their own vision of the sociopolitical changes the country needed, as definite progress in the state's political life.

According to the Iranian analyst, at the new stage, the approaches to implementing bilateral cooperation must be adjusted.

First, the slightest tension existing between the two republics and complicating their dialog must be overcome. The only thing that fell into this category was the contradictions related to gas prices which sometimes led to a halt in its export to Iran. A balanced approach to this problem will make it possible to harmonize Iranian-Turkmen relations to the greatest extent possible. The initial basis—historical and civilizational communality, a common border, as well as affiliation with the same religion (Islam)—will make this goal easy to reach.

The first Turkmenistan president laid a solid foundation for the bilateral dialog. From this proceeds the need to continue the previous policy, which the country's new leadership should unconditionally follow.

Iran considers it important and necessary for the new president to fulfill his promises, which can be regarded as correcting mistakes and overcoming the stratification of the recent past. The Iranian

<sup>20</sup> See: *Ayandeye no*, 22 December, 2006.

<sup>21</sup> "Berdymukhammedov is Eternally Loyal to Turkmenbashi," available at [http://www.mehmews.com], 11 April, 2007 (in Farsi).



analyst considers this to be carrying out educational reforms, ensuring the republic's withdrawal from information isolation by providing the population with broad access to the Internet, recognizing higher education diplomas received at foreign universities as valid, and so on. The author also notes that thanks to his political versatility, Saparmurat Niyazov was able to successfully maneuver between the two major poles of power—the U.S. and Russia, drawing significant political and economic dividends for his country from this. It is important that Turkmenistan's new leadership skillfully avoid the snares set by these powers and not fall into their trap. Iran's and Turkmenistan's diplomacy faces much work aimed at preserving the priority nature of bilateral relations to the benefit of the peoples of both republics. The Iranian analyst draws the following conclusion: both countries have accumulated vast interaction potential. It is not only important not to waste it at the current stage of changes, but also to make it a trampoline for a qualitative new jump. "This must be done slowly in order not to lose what has already been gained."<sup>22</sup>

The Iranian scientific community also responded to President Niyazov's death. A symposium called "Turkmenistan After Saparmurat Niyazov," held in January 2007 at Tehran University, looked at many of the problems relating to the current reality in present-day Turkmenistan and its immediate future. Head of the Department of CIS Countries of the Iranian Foreign Ministry Aga Jani expressed the following viewpoint when speaking at this event: there are no political forces inside Turkmenistan capable of carrying out fundamental changes in the next year or two. He believes that the kinship-tribal structure established in Turkmenistan has helped to retain the atmosphere of the Soviet communist period and conserved the era of Turkmenbashi's rule, squelching the desire among the obedient, tolerant, and easy-going people of this republic to engage in social protest and depriving it of the strength to do this. But Turkmenbashi's death marks the beginning of the new period in which a gradual evolution of the political-administrative system will take place. Just how the power vacuum will be filled is also important. According to Aga Jani, Saparmurat Niyazov's era will not pass into oblivion with his death, many of its features will be subjected to revision. We will become, he believes, witnesses to gradual changes in the power structure and political system. Some have already occurred due to the reconsideration carried out of the principle of power transfer. Aga Jani means the election by the Khalk Maslakhaty (the National Consultative Council) of vice premier of the government, Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov, as acting president instead of parliament speaker Ovezgeldy Ataev, as stipulated by the Constitution, against whom a criminal case was instigated. In the short-term perspective, no other significant changes in political life are predicted, according to Aga Jani, but in the medium term—in the next five years—the head of the Iranian Foreign Ministry Department sees the possibility of a significant evolution in the government and political system. This is unlikely to be related to the actions of the opposition, which is living abroad and in no way influences the processes going on in the country. Turkmenistan's relations with the outside world might be aggravated for one reason only—the price of energy resources, but this will in no way reflect on domestic stability. The high-ranking Iranian Foreign Ministry official criticized the policy of state control over the religious processes going on in Turkmenistan, but in so doing, he noted that Islam does not occupy a significant place in the spiritual life of the people of this republic. In his view, the country's new government should establish a dialog with the opposition. The leadership's headstrong methods relating to the personality cult should also be rejected. Otherwise this might lead to negative trends in the state's domestic life and interfere with its foreign policy dialog. The country needs to open up more to the outside world, which could give rise to new prospects of bilateral dialog for its partner, Iran.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> "Proposals for Restructuring Relations," available at [www.baztab.com], 5 February, 2007 (in Farsi).

<sup>23</sup> See: "Turkmenistan in the Era After Saparmurat Niyazov. The Personality Cult and Voluntarism of the Turkmenistan President Should Be Overcome," available at [http://www.isna.ir], 3 January, 2007 (in Farsi).

Professor at Tehran University Allahe Kulai expressed the opinion at the above-mentioned symposium that, by taking advantage of the pluses of good-neighborly relations with the IRI, Saparmurat Niyazov was the only leader of the Central Asian states who occupied an unequivocally independent and clear position in the bilateral dialog with America. Under conditions when, after the 9/11 events, the U.S. managed to impose its military presence in the region, Turkmenistan became the only country that avoided American pressure and did not consent to the troops of the U.S. or its allies being deployed on its territory. According to A. Kulai, it is precisely Turkmenistan's enormous supplies of hydrocarbons that allow it not to become involved in interregional conflicts and occupy a position that differs from that of other neighboring states in the context of the crisis in American-Iranian relations. She characterized Turkmenbashi as a real relic of the Stalinism era, who did not permit nonconformity in the country in the form of the opposition. Nevertheless, A. Kulai believes that the republic's geopolitical position and its latest political reality make it possible to predict certain progress in domestic life.<sup>24</sup>

## Neo-Conservatives and the Bilateral Dialog

It is possible that factors in Iran's political life are also having an impact on the Iranian-Turkmen dialog. Recently, the position of the neo-conservatives who came to power in the country in 2005 has noticeably weakened. This is related to the fact that at the December 2006 municipal elections and the elections of the Assembly of Experts, the supporters of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad unexpectedly underwent a serious defeat. Most of the Iranian electorate preferred moderate conservatives to Islamic radicals. During the year or so they were in power, most of the socioeconomic programs the radicals promised failed to materialize. It is possible that former IRI president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, well known as a pragmatic politician, will rise again to the summit of Iranian political life. In this way, most of the Iranian electorate is demonstrating its adherence to the idea of the state becoming integrated in the globalization processes and emerging from its isolation. The moderate conservative forces, in counterbalance to the neo-conservatives, are promising a more constructive and irreversible dialog with the West. Of course, this will have a positive effect on the entire complex of Iranian foreign political ties. In particular, this might place the priority again on Iran's interrelations with the Central Asian countries. The advent to power of the neo-conservatives headed by current president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has shifted the accents somewhat in the state's foreign policy to the Islamic countries of the Middle East, where the current administration is trying to act more efficiently in order to achieve real leadership in the region. A close analysis also clearly shows the introduction of adjustments into the Central Asian vector of Iran's foreign policy. For example, only three of the 25 leading Tehran newspapers responded to the death of the Turkmenistan president.<sup>25</sup> When reporting on the arrival of the Iranian delegation to participate in the inauguration of the new Turkmenistan leader, the analytical website "Baztab" headed the note as follows: "Davudi (the IRI's first vice-president.—*V.M.*) has left for Turkmenistan instead of the president."<sup>26</sup> The Central Asian region, which is definitely important for Iran, does not look like an area of priority attention just now. Even the new president's trips to the republics of this region are not felt to be the next steps in cultivating integration with the Central Asian

<sup>24</sup> See: "Turkmenistan in the Era After Saparmurat Niyazov. After Niyazov, Radical Changes will Occur in Turkmenistan's Policy," available at [<http://www.isna.ir>], 3 January, 2007 (in Farsi).

<sup>25</sup> See: "The Most Important Headings in Today's Morning Newspapers," available at [[mehrnews.com](http://mehrnews.com)], 22 December, 2007 (in Farsi).

<sup>26</sup> "Davudi has Left for Turkmenistan Instead of the President," available at [[baztab.ir](http://baztab.ir)], 14 March, 2007 (in Farsi).

states—they are aimed at maintaining the status quo at the current level. This, incidentally, does not indicate a cooling off in the Iranian leadership's attitude toward this region, it only shows that the neo-conservatives are defining their strategy in this geopolitical space.

The Iranian leadership is closely following and trying to objectively analyze the new reality in the region's countries over the past year or two: the foreign policy advances in Uzbekistan, which are expressed in a shift away from the pro-Western toward the pro-Russian orientation, and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan, one of the results of which was inconsistency in the foreign policy predictions. IRI is also concerned about the possibility of a change in Turkmenistan's domestic and foreign policy relating to the death of its eternal leader, Saparmurat Niyazov. Keeping in mind the anti-Western component of the foreign policy of the current president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, which is greater than was espoused by Iran's previous leaders, tougher steps can be expected from the IRI in opposing other foreign players in Central Asia's geopolitical field. This toughness can be most clearly seen in resolving the problem of the Caspian's legal status, where the Iranian position is closer to Turkmenistan's view. Iran is making frequent and loud statements against non-regional players being involved in using the hydrocarbons of the Caspian zone. This precept is based on the fact that any actions and proposals coming from non-regional states are capable only of harming regional integration and undermining mutual trust. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad himself has repeatedly stated that the West is only pursuing its own political goals in the region and is in no way concerned about the interests of the Caspian zone countries. The IRI on the other hand, as its leaders constantly declare, are placing and intend to continue placing primary importance on regional economic integration based on historical, cultural-civilizational, and geographical similarities. It encompasses such vitally important spheres for Iran as trade, transportation, power engineering, and the advance of new technology. In so doing, integration is occurring, in the IRI's opinion, at a rate that does not suit it, due to the West's, but primarily the U.S's, interference. Taking into account the clearly expressed anti-American component in the foreign policy of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's government, we can expect its unequivocal non-acceptance of any pro-American trends in Turkmenistan's foreign policy. Iran will not have an immediate response to this, concentrating for the time being on continuing mutually advantageous economic cooperation. It will only react, and the nature of this reaction is so far unclear, if this process crosses certain IRI "red lines." However, on the whole, there is no sign that the basic principles of Iran's strategy in the region will undergo any significant changes. A specific situation might cause a change in tactics, but in all likelihood Iran's strategy in the Turkmenistan vector will continue to hold the maintained course.

There can be no doubt that the IRI does not particularly want the position of other Islamic states to strengthen in Turkmenistan (particularly Sunni Islamic states). This, or at least, the desire to diversify its relations with the Islamic countries is shown by the fact that the new Turkmenistan president made his first foreign visit to Saudi Arabia. The IRI press is stressing the fact that the first visit is always symbolic.<sup>27</sup> Berdymukhammedov's trip to Riyadh laid the foundations for real contacts between the two states (officially these ties were established at the beginning of the 1990s, but did not acquire practical content). The specificity of Saudi relations with the Central Asian countries, the priority of which is "restoring ties between these states and the universal Muslim ummah,"<sup>28</sup> could not have been realized during the era of the first Turkmenistan president. Of course, in this context, Berdymukhammedov's desire to shift the relations between the two countries onto a practical plane shows that the country is moving away from the political stereotypes that developed in the previous era. The members of the delegation, which included the leaders of various economic and social-cultural blocs,

<sup>27</sup> See: "The Turkmenistan President Arrives in Saudi Arabia," available at [mehrnews.com], 13 April, 2007 (in Farsi).

<sup>28</sup> G.G. Kosach, "Perviy zarubezhniy vizit prezidenta Turkmenistana: Saudovskaia Araviia," available at [http://www/iimes.ru] 19 April, 2007.

demonstrated the areas of potential interrelations—including the progress of Islamic education, the building of mosques, and the increase in the number of pilgrims going to the Islamic shrines. It is precisely this area of Turkmen-Iranian contacts that was not significantly developed under Saparmurat Niyazov. Against the background of tough competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia for leadership in the Islamic world, this step could mean a trend toward the more pragmatic nature of Turkmenistan's international policy in the new historical era and the desire of its leadership to move beyond the narrow framework of fraternity imposed by the IRI.

In this way, no significant changes should be expected in the development of the bilateral Iranian-Turkmen dialog. The foundation of mutually advantageous cooperation appears to be still firmly in place after the death of authoritative President Niyazov. This confidence is based on the new president's desire to retain everything positive that was built during the old regime. In so doing, it is possible that the new leadership will go for moderate liberalization of sociopolitical life in order to raise the people's trust in the government. Nevertheless, this will have no effect on the above-mentioned bilateral dialog.

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