

RELIGION, CULTURE, AND SOCIETY

**PRAGMATIC POLITICS:
IRAN, CENTRAL ASIA AND
CULTURAL FOREIGN POLICY****Dr Edward WASTNIDGE**

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ABSTRACT

Since the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, Central Asia assumed renewed importance in Iranian foreign policy. The region has played a significant role in Iran's historical geography, and Persian cultural influence continues to be felt in the region today. Iran has sought to present itself as a "status-quo" power in its bilateral and multi-lateral approaches to Central Asia, something that is in marked contrast to the revolutionary rhetoric highlighted in Western

media analyses of its foreign policy. This paper focuses on how Iran has made use of its historical cultural weight in the region to further its influence, something that is evident in its increasing activity in fellow Persian-speaking nations of Tajikistan and Afghanistan. As such, the paper will demonstrate how Iran has sought to present a pragmatic face to the region, one that draws on its own cultural levers as a way of expanding its influence.

KEYWORDS: *Iran, foreign policy, culture, Central Asia.*

Introduction

Since the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, Central Asia has assumed a renewed importance in Iranian foreign policy thinking. The region has played a significant role in Iran's historical geography, and is a region replete with cultural links to Iran and vice-versa. This article will provide an overview of Iranian cultural foreign policy toward Central Asia. As I demonstrate, cultural links are an oft-repeated theme in Iranian foreign policy thinking toward the region and as such form an interesting aspect of Iranian diplomacy. Since 1991, Iran can be seen as drawing on cultural and historical commonalities as a basis for furthering its relations and arguably its influence in Central Asia. This is a theme that became especially prominent during the Khatami presidency (1997-2005), when Iranian foreign policy arguably underwent a noticeable "cultural turn," with Khatami's promulgation of "Dialog among Civilizations" forming a key plank of Iranian public diplomacy. Despite a return to revolutionary rhetoric in foreign policy under the Ahmadinejad presidency, the cultural emphasis on relations with states in the region persisted and indeed this period saw a continuation of Iranian cultural initiatives "on the ground" in the region. This was particularly noticeable in the Islamic Republic's attempts to further enhance relations with its fellow Persian speaking nations of Tajikistan, and to a lesser extent, Afghanistan.

This paper will demonstrate how Iran has largely taken a pragmatic course in its relations with the region, and will use the strong emphasis on culture in its broadest sense as an example of pragmatism trumping revolutionary rhetoric in Iran's foreign policy calculus. It will give an overview of cultural initiatives pursued with the Central Asian states.

The Historical and Strategic Backdrop

The change in the geopolitical circumstances on Iran's northern borders following the implosion of the Soviet Union meant that Iran was without a land border with Russia/the Soviet Union for the first time in several centuries. The independence of the Central Asian republics in 1991 provided Iran with the opportunity to reacquaint itself with a region with which it shares much in the way of history and culture. Such links stretch as far back as the sixth century BC and the Achaemenid Empire's rule over the region. Bukhara, in present day Uzbekistan, is seen as a historical center of Persian culture and literature, and Persian remained the language of literature, science and diplomacy in Central Asia, even after the "Turkification" of the region during the 10th and 11th centuries. Furthermore, large parts of southern Central Asia remained under nominal Iranian control during the Safavid period and later under Nader Shah, though this was gradually eroded by the expanding Russian Empire in the 18th and 19th centuries. This historical precedent to Iran's relations with Central Asia helps frame the desire to "reconnect" with a region that has played a key role in its own history.

At the time of the independence of the Central Asian states, Iran was already in the midst of replacing radical idealism with pragmatic realism in its foreign policy calculations. Evidence of such pragmatism can be seen in the Iranian sensitivity to Russian concerns following the breakup of the Soviet Union, for example seeking Moscow's approval for the opening of consulates in Central Asia.¹ Furthermore, there was little receptivity to Iranian revolutionary Islamic ideology in a region that was

¹ See: E. Herzig, "Iran and Central Asia," in: *Central Asian Security; The International Context*, ed. by R. Allison, L. Johnson, Royal Institute of International Affairs, London, 2001, pp. 171-198.

undeniably influenced by 80 years of Soviet atheism, and whose post-independence leaders had put the new states firmly on a secular course. In addition, what nascent Islamic sentiment there was within the region would not have been receptive to Shi'a Iran's religious influence in a predominantly Sunni region. Indeed the Saudi Arabian, Wahhabi brand of Islam has arguably found more receptivity amongst the region's Islamists since independence.² Therefore in an area where Soviet style autocracy largely predominates, the Islamic Republic has sought instead to pursue a pragmatic path that serves its national interests.

An enduring feature of Iranian foreign policy since the early 1990s has been the keenness it has shown toward regional cooperation through groupings such as the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), and latterly the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). In taking a multilateral approach, as seen in its promotion of ECO and continued efforts at upgrading from observer status in the SCO, Iran has sought to portray itself, in these fora at least, as a rational and reliable actor adhering to international norms. This was in keeping with the move toward greater regionalism in international relations seen during the 1990s, and demonstrates an awareness that Iran's national interest, at least in this region, was furthered by promoting normal relations and building confidence with the newly independent states.

The 1990s and early 2000s also saw Iranian foreign policy studies reflecting the new realities of Iran's international situation with regards to the breakup of the Soviet Union. This was also reflected within Iran itself with the Foreign Ministry establishing the Center for the Study of Central Asia and the Caucasus in 1992, and that center's subsequent publication of journals such as the English-language *Amu Darya* and Persian-language "*Motāle'āt-e āsiā-ye markazi va qafqāz*" (Central Asia and the Caucasus Review).

Iran was also active in diplomatic mediation efforts in the Civil War in Tajikistan which ran from 1992-1997, playing a key role in securing the final settlement in collaboration with Russia.³ Despite the United Tajik Opposition having a largely Islamic character, Iran did not provide support as it had done to certain groups in the Middle East and instead sought to mediate in the conflict. Although Iran initially gave some moral and vocal support to the Tajik opposition, *realpolitik* predominated in its strategic calculus and the Islamic Republic sought to preserve the autocratic status quo in the country, with some minor concessions such as representation for the Islamists in Tajikistan's rubber stamp parliament forming part of the final settlement. Ultimately, Iran calculated that supporting Islamists would decrease regional security and work against Iran's own interests in the region.

Bilateral Cultural Initiatives by Iran in Central Asia

It is worth noting here that the following details links fostered on a state to state level involving heads of government/state, foreign ministers and high ranking diplomats, albeit with some significant involvement of parastatal agencies, notably the Islamic Culture and Relations Organization (ICRO), an organization that is affiliated to the Ministry for Culture and Islamic Guidance and is ultimately under the control of the Supreme Leader's office.⁴ In some ways it can be viewed as the Islamic Re-

² See: O. Roy, *The New Central Asia: The Creation of Nations*, New York University Press, New York, 2009.

³ See: J.W. Parker, *Persian Dreams: Moscow and Tehran since the Fall of the Shah*, Potomac Books Inc. Dulles, Virginia, 2009.

⁴ See: N. von Maltzahn, *The Syria-Iran Axis: Cultural Diplomacy and International Relations in the Middle East*, I.B. Tauris, London, New York, 2013.

public's equivalent of the British Council, or China's Confucius Institutes, enabling Iran's cultural outreach abroad.

As one might expect, the main focus of Iranian cultural initiatives in the region has been Tajikistan, due to the two countries' cultural and linguistic links. These will be discussed in further detail in the following section which will examine Iran-Tajikistan relations more closely. This section will therefore outline the main cultural initiatives of Iran toward the other Central Asian republics. Hence, the following chronologically details the main meetings that took place and the subsequent initiatives on a state by state basis.

Turkmenistan

The first memoranda in expanding cultural relations were signed between the two states in 1993, which saw the first Iranian cultural attaché subsequently assume his post as part of the Iranian embassy in Ashgabat in 1994.⁵ The ICRO then opened its own cultural center in 1999, and set about expanding its activities to include provision of Persian language classes, with around 1,000 students enrolling per year since 2002, setting up a library at the cultural center, and hosting yearly exhibitions of Iranian books, films and art.⁶ In March 2003, then-Turkmen president Saparmurat Niyazov signed a raft of accords, including one on expanding cultural cooperation, during his state visit to Tehran.⁷ Commenting at the time of the visit, Iranian political scientist and politician Davood Hermidas-Bavand emphasizes the visit's importance in term of cultural relations, stating: "For Iran, Turkmenistan is of crucial importance. This visit is likely to be a key element in the development of political and economic relations, and above all in the field of culture. Turkmenistan belongs to the basin of Iranian culture. From Turkmenistan, we can enter more easily in [to the] whole Central Asian region."⁸

While one might detect a semblance of cultural chauvinism in Hermidas-Bavand's citing of Turkmenistan belonging to the "basin of Iranian culture," it evidences the perception of a deep-seated cultural link to the region and the potentialities of cultural relations as a means of furthering ties. In a joint venture, the ICRO co-organized a conference with the Turkmen Ministry of Culture in April 2005 in Ashgabat to commemorate the 12th century Persian-language poet Anvari, who was born in present-day Turkmenistan.⁹ This joint veneration of a shared cultural figure, while a relatively small scale affair, nevertheless demonstrates the salience of culture as a diplomatic tool in enhancing relations between the two states. Such cultural outreach was also reciprocal, as can be seen in vice president of the Humanitarian Association of Turkmen of the World, or HATW Mohammad Aydogdiev's visit to the predominantly Turkmen Iranian city of Gonbad-e Kavus in July 2005. Aydogdiev was met by the head of the ICRO and also met with local Turkmen cultural figures.¹⁰ This reciprocity may be seen as unexpected, considering the Islamic Republic's wariness of irredentist sentiment among its ethnically heterogeneous population that has links to neighboring states—one can point to historical agitation from its Arab population in Khuzestan and Baluch separatists in

⁵ See website of the ICRO in Ashgabat [<http://ashgabat.icro.ir/index.aspx?siteid=162&pageid=5120>] (in Persian).

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ See: "Turkmen President Visits Iran," *RFE/RL Newslines*, 12 March, 2003.

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ See: "Diplomat: Iranian Civilization Plays Crucial Role in Global Cultural Development," *Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA)*, 22 April, 2005.

¹⁰ See: *Ettelā'āt-e beynolmelālli* (Ettelā'āt International), 25 July, 2005.

Sistan-Baluchistan to name but two. However, such sentiment has not been expressed among Iran's Turkmen population in recent history, which goes some way to explaining the broadly positive state of cultural relations between the two nations.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad visited Turkmenistan on his first Central Asian tour (encompassing Turkmenistan and Tajikistan) in July 2006, but cultural issues were not on the agenda during this trip, with the primary focus being enhancement of cooperation in the natural gas sector.¹¹ Ahmadinejad paid further visits in 2007, 2010, 2012 and 2013, emphasizing the importance placed by Iran on maintain good relations with its neighbor, although the resultant agreements were again primarily economic in nature.

In February 2010, Iran did score a minor public relations success in co-sponsoring a successful U.N. resolution to recognize *Nowruz* as an international cultural celebration.¹² Iran subsequently held the first *Nowruz* international celebration, which was attended by Niyazov's successor as president, Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov, along with the presidents of Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Iraq.¹³ Berdimukhammedov also attended the second *Nowruz* international celebration in Tehran, and Ashghabad played host to the fourth such gathering in 2013, which was attended by Ahmadinejad,¹⁴ thus further cementing cultural ties between the two states and arguably between Iran and Central Asia more broadly.

Kyrgyzstan

Iran has also sought to stress cultural ties in its attempts to expand its relations with Kyrgyzstan. The first memoranda on cultural cooperation were signed in 1993, although Iran did not open up a separate cultural center in Bishkek until 2010.¹⁵ In December 2003, then-Kyrgyz president Askar Akaev led a high ranking delegation during a state visit to Tehran, where a number of communiqués relating to artistic and cultural links were signed, along with memoranda on enhancing trade relations.¹⁶ In addition, the Kyrgyzstan-Iran Friendship Association, based in Bishkek, was established in 2002 with the aim of enhancing Kyrgyz-Iran relations through cultural exchange.¹⁷ In terms of joint initiatives, in February 2008, Kyrgyz Culture Minister Sultan Rayev met with his Iranian counterpart in Tehran to expand educational and cultural cooperation, and sign a protocol allowing Kyrgyz scholars access to Iranian archives and reciprocal sharing of archival information.¹⁸ The establishment of the ICRO cultural center in Bishkek in 2010 saw more tangible efforts at enhancing cultural links. For example, in December 2010, the ICRO, along with the Tajik embassy in Kyrgyzstan co-sponsored the translation of Omar Khayyam's quatrains into Kyrgyz and Russian.¹⁹ The Iranian culture

¹¹ See: "Iran Looks East as Ahmadinejad Heads on Central Asia Tour," *Agence France Presse*, 23 July, 2006.

¹² See: "International Day of Nowruz," available at [<http://www.un.org/en/events/nowruzday/>].

¹³ See: "Iran Hosts International Nowruz Celebrations," *Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB)*, available at [<http://english.irib.ir/analysis/commentaries/item/58119-iran-hosts-international-nowruz-celebrations>].

¹⁴ See: "President Ahmadinejad to Attend Nowruz Festival in Turkmenistan," *Press TV (Iran)*, available at [<http://www.presstv.com/detail/2013/03/20/294528/iran-pres-to-attend-nowruz-festival/>].

¹⁵ See website of the ICRO in Bishkek [<http://fa.bishkek.icro.ir/index.aspx?siteid=293&pageid=34615>] (in Persian).

¹⁶ See: "Kyrgyz President Visits Iran," *Xinhua*, 22 December, 2003.

¹⁷ The group has met with Iranian officials to encourage greater cooperation in cultural fields (see, for example: "Iran, Kyrgyzstan Confer on Expansion of Cultural Ties," *Ettelā'āt-e beynolmelālli* (Ettelā'āt International), 21 January, 2010).

¹⁸ See: "Kyrgyzstan, Iran Sign Protocol on Archives," *BBC Monitoring Central Asia*, 25 February, 2008.

¹⁹ See: "Khayyam's Quatrains to be Published in Kyrgyz and Russian," *Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB)*, 9 December, 2010, available at [<http://english.irib.ir/radioculture/art/persian-literature/item/142824-khayyams-quatrains-to-be-published-in-kyrgyz-and-russian>].

center also hosts yearly Iranian film weeks, in conjunction with the Kyrgyzstan-Iran Friendship Association,²⁰ and exhibitions of Iranian books, art, religious festivals, and provision of free Persian language classes²¹. Further meetings between Iranian and Kyrgyz cultural representatives took place in 2012 which emphasized a desire for the expansion of cultural ties,²² and relations continue to grow between the two states.

Kazakhstan

Iran's cultural activities in Kazakhstan have historically been a low priority, with the focus of relations instead being on cooperation in the oil and natural gas sectors (with some moderate success), but at times conflicting views on the Caspian Sea legal regime. Iran's first memoranda of cultural cooperation with Kazakhstan were signed in 1996, and since then the ICRO has hosted yearly cultural weeks showcasing Iranian films, art and scientific research.²³ The ICRO center has also published a range of books and magazines in Kazakh, Persian and Russian since 2001, primarily dealing with Iranian culture, Iran-Central-Asia historical relations and Persian language teaching.²⁴

The ICRO chief, Mahmoud Mohammadi-Araqi visited Kazakhstan in April 2005²⁵ and August 2006, the latter as part of a wider regional tour aimed at enhancing Iranian cultural activities in Central Asia, during which he stressed the need for communiqués to be signed in cultural fields.²⁶ Subsequently, the ICRO coordinated an exhibition of Iranian culture in Astana in late 2006,²⁷ and in 2007, during Kazakh president Nazarbaev's state visit to Iran, memoranda of understanding were signed between both states' culture ministries with the aim of enhancing cultural tourism cooperation and allowing sharing of Iranian archival information with Kazakh scholars.²⁸ The building of cultural links, while modest, has also been reciprocal, with a particular focus on the Iranian city of Gorgan, in part on account of that city's historical Kazakh diaspora population. A Kazakh cultural center in the Gorgan city has been inaugurated,²⁹ and the Kazakh government opened a consulate in the city in 2009.³⁰ An Iran-Kazakhstan friendship society also exists in Tehran, founded in 2010, this organization describes itself as a "non-governmental, non-political, non-profit" association focused on improving ties in a number of areas.³¹ The group is primarily run by Iranian business figures and academics, and organized a conference on Iranian-Kazakh cultural and civilizational relations in December 2013.³²

²⁰ See: "Iran to Hold Film Week in Kyrgyzstan," *Press TV*, 31 January, 20011, available at [<http://edition.presstv.ir/detail/162816.html>].

²¹ See website of the ICRO in Bishkek.

²² See: "Kyrgyz Academic Figure Urges Promotion of Cultural Interactions with Iran," *Fars News Agency*, 12 November, 2012, and "Iran, Kyrgyzstan Stress Enhancement of Cultural Ties," *Fars News Agency*, 5 December, 2012.

²³ See website of the ICRO in Almaty [<http://fa.almaty.icro.ir/index.aspx?siteid=203&pageid=26814>] (in Persian).

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ See: "Iran, Kazakhstan Stress Expansion of Cultural Ties," *Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA)*, 7 April, 2005.

²⁶ See: "ICRO Head Arrives in Kazakhstan," *ICRO website*, 20 August, 2006, available at [<http://en.icro.ir/index.aspx?siteid=257&pageid=11747&newsview=337911>].

²⁷ See: "Kazakhstan Hosting Iranian Art, Culture Show," *Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA)*, 24 December, 2006.

²⁸ See: "Kazakh, Iranian Leaders Sign Joint Communiqué," *BBC Monitoring Central Asia*, 15 October, 2007.

²⁹ See: "Iran, Kazakhstan Stress Expansion of Cultural Ties."

³⁰ See: "General Consulate of Kazakhstan Opened in Gorgan," *Kazakhstan Today*, 20 February, 2009, available at [<http://engnews.gazeta.kz/art.asp?aid=290802>].

³¹ See website of the Iran-Kazakhstan Friendship Association [<http://www.irkz.org>] (in Persian).

³² *Ibidem*.

Uzbekistan

Iranian cultural initiatives in Uzbekistan are the least developed in comparison to the rest of Central Asia. This is arguably a result of the historically lukewarm relations between the two states. The ICRO presence in Uzbekistan is restricted to the Iranian embassy in Tashkent,³³ and its activities are comparatively low-key. The ICRO head Mohammadi-Araqi did pay a visit in 2006 as part of his Central Asian tour, where he met with cultural and religious figures,³⁴ but he did not meet any high ranking Uzbek government officials. Furthermore, in December 2013 the head of the Uzbekistan-Iran Friendship Society was arrested in Samarkand on charges of distributing Shi'a religious propaganda sourced from the Iranian embassy in Uzbekistan.³⁵

As the next section demonstrates, Iran's primary focus in Central Asia has been Tajikistan. Relations between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are complicated by a number of factors, including Tajik control of the main tributaries to the Amu Darya that is vital for Uzbekistan's cotton industry, and the presence of a large Tajik minority, primarily located in the historically Persian-speaking cities of Bukhara and Samarkand. This, along with historically conflicting foreign policy orientations negatively affects Iran's relations with Uzbekistan. Furthermore, current Uzbek president Karimov's promotion of Uzbekistan as the key power in Central Asia, and perception of his country as the successor to Tamerlane and preserver of Turkic unity, does not correspond well with a resurgence of Tajik-Iranian cultural and political presence in the region.³⁶ In light of Uzbekistan's sensitivities to Iran's presence in the country the ICRO's activities have been more muted than in neighboring states, and have been mainly involved in providing books and equipment to Uzbek universities that offer courses in Iranian Studies and Persian language.³⁷

Iran, Tajikistan and the Union of Persian Speaking Nations

Since independence, Tajikistan has played host to eight Iranian presidential visits, with Tajik president Emomali Rakhmon making thirteen official trips to Tehran since 1995.³⁸ Of the eight Iranian presidential visits since 1997, six of these were by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Mohammad Khatami visited Tajikistan in 2002 and 2004, and numerous accords in the cultural sphere were signed during these and in reciprocal visits by Rakhmon. Iran initially sought to expand its cultural influence when Tajikistan first declared its independence by seeking to promote use of the Perso-Arabic alphabet in its fellow Persian-speaking nation. This proved to be difficult though in a population that was fully literate in the Cyrillic alphabet, with only around 1% being able to read Arabic script at that time.³⁹ Further efforts at enhancing cultural links were made in the early years of independence,

³³ See website of the ICRO in Tashkent [<http://fa.tashkent.icro.ir/index.aspx?siteid=228&pageid=3476>] (in Persian).

³⁴ See: "Iranian Official in Uzbekistan to Hold Talks with Cultural Figures," *Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA)*, 21 August, 2006.

³⁵ See: "Samarkand Resident Sentenced for Propagating Shi'ite Islam," *RFE/RL*, 21 November, 2013, available at [<http://www.rferl.org/content/uzbek-propagating-islam/25175284.html>].

³⁶ See: Sh. Hunter, *Iran's Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era: Resisting the New International Order*, Praeger/ABC-CLIO LLC, Santa Barbara, California, 2010.

³⁷ See website of the ICRO in Tashkent.

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁹ See: M. Atkin, "Tajikistan's Relations with Iran and Afghanistan," in: *The New Geopolitics of Central Asia and its Borderlands*, ed. by A Banuazizi, M. Weiner, I.B. Tauris, London, 1994, pp. 91-117.

with Iran sponsoring a number of newspaper and academic journal publications and the opening of bookstores in Tajikistan, and Iranian embassy assistance in the restoration of libraries and academic departments holding Persian language and literature resources across the country.⁴⁰ The cultural section of the Iranian embassy in Dushanbe played a prominent role in establishing the Tajik-Persian Culture Research Institute, the “Alhoda” bookstore and the publication “Payvand” in the Tajik capital.⁴¹

The first memoranda on cultural relations were signed in 1993, and according to the ICRO, the Dushanbe center is one of Iran’s most active cultural institutions abroad.⁴² These early moves were followed by further agreements on enhancing cultural cooperation signed during reciprocal visits starting with President Rakhmon’s trip to Iran in June 1995 and continuing into the Khatami era. Indeed, the latter’s official visit to Tajikistan had a considerable impact in helping to cement cultural ties, establishing numerous joint cultural ventures.⁴³ These included collaboration amongst artists and musicians, funding for Tajik students to study in Iran, cooperation in the higher education sector, and support for conferences relating to Rudaki and other Persian literary figures.⁴⁴ Iran also made gestures of material support by paying for the weddings of 100 couples chosen from the poorest families from across Tajikistan in 2005.⁴⁵

Iran was keen to underscore its commitment to expanding relations in all fields with tangible economic investment that built on the cultural relations developed since independence. Iran’s infrastructural investment in the country has been well documented, and toward the end of the Khatami era in 2005 funding was provided for the Anzob/Istiqlol tunnel through the Pamirs, and the Sangtuda-2 hydropower plant. Iran has also been the only state willing to fully invest in Tajikistan’s hydropower industry,⁴⁶ while Tajikistan’s other international partners, such as China and Russia, maintain a more cautious stance on account of Uzbekistan’s objections to Tajik hydropower development as previously discussed.

Moving into the presidency from August 2005, Khatami’s successor Ahmadinejad was also keen to build on the burgeoning relationship. In contrast to the rhetoric that characterized Iran’s relations with the West during this period, Ahmadinejad’s stance toward Central Asia, and Tajikistan in particular, was a pragmatic one which in a similar vein to Khatami drew upon the notion of shared cultural identity as a starting point from which to pursue enhanced ties. Clark argues that this relates to Ahmadinejad’s own nationalistic conception of Persian identity which shaped his government’s foreign policy toward its fellow Persian-speaking states of Afghanistan and Tajikistan.⁴⁷ This resulted in a continuation of culturally framed foreign policy initiatives in Iran’s dealings with Tajikistan during the Ahmadinejad presidency.

Iranian investment in cultural projects continued in July 2006 with its funding of the establishment of an Iran Chamber of Culture opened at Nasir Khosro University in Tajikistan, providing the

⁴⁰ See: M. Mahmoudi, “āsiā markazi va roshd hamkārihāye chand jānebe irān va tājikistān (Central Asia and the Growth of Iran-Tajikistan Multilateral Cooperation),” *Motāle’āt-e āsiā-ye markazi va qafqāz* (Central Asia and the Caucasus Review), No. 58, Summer 2007, pp. 7-48.

⁴¹ See: Ibidem.

⁴² See website of the ICRO in Dushanbe [<http://fa.dushanbe.icro.ir/index.aspx?siteid=185&pageid=7672>] (in Persian).

⁴³ See: M. Mahmoudi, op. cit.

⁴⁴ See: S.A. Mowjāni, “gozāresh-e safar-e sādegh kharāzi m’āvan-e vezārat-e khāreji be tājikestān (Report of Deputy Foreign Minister Sadegh Kharazi’s Trip to Tajikistan),” *majleh-ye didgāhā* (Viewpoints Magazine), No. 14, 2000, pp. 30-33.

⁴⁵ See: “From Tehran with Love: 100 Weddings in Tajikistan,” *Agence France Presse*, 23 May, 2005.

⁴⁶ See: R. Abdullo, “Iranian Presidents and Iran-Tajik Relations,” *Central Asia and Caucasus Journal*, Vol. 13, Issue 3, 2013, pp. 167-176.

⁴⁷ See: B. Clark, “Iranian Foreign Policy Toward Tajikistan and Afghanistan during the Ahmadinejad Presidency: The Rising Salience of Persian National Identity,” *Journal of Central Asian & Caucasian Studies*, Vol. 7, Issue 13, 2012, pp. 73-105.

facility with books, computers and study equipment.⁴⁸ The same month also saw the first joint summit held between the heads of the three Persian-speaking nations of Iran, Tajikistan and Afghanistan in Dushanbe,⁴⁹ which while producing little more than declarations of the three nations' cultural proximity, did evidence a certain degree of receptivity in pursuing closer ties based on shared culture. The idea to increase tri-lateral cooperation was first publicly mooted in meetings between former vice-president of Iran, Parviz Davudi, and Tajik Prime Minister Oqil Oqilov on the sidelines of the SCO summit in Moscow in 2005,⁵⁰ with the ultimate aim (on the Iranian side at least) of establishing a Union of Persian-Speaking Nations. A noteworthy outcome of the 2006 summit was the agreement to form a "cultural cooperation commission" to promote closer ties, part of which was the establishment of a jointly-run Persian-language TV channel to be broadcast across the three states.⁵¹ Khamenei also voiced his support for closer ties between Persian-speaking states when he received the Tajik president during his visit to Tehran in 2007.⁵² The three states also agreed to establish the Economic Council of the Persian-Speaking Union in March 2008.⁵³ Yearly tri-lateral meetings continue to take place, with Iran and Tajikistan showing the most enthusiasm for expanding cooperation, and Afghanistan playing a low-key role.⁵⁴ Arguably, the forging of closer ties was potentially advantageous for all three countries, as a means of addressing all three states' relative political and economic isolation at the time. Furthermore, it can be viewed as partly constituting a response to renewed Turkish efforts at expanding its influence in the region at the time, with Turkey seeking to extend its cultural reach as a result of its activist foreign policy since the coming to power of the AKP party in 2002.⁵⁵

Despite such attempts to bolster cooperation, joint culture-related projects such as the TV station are yet to come to fruition. This has been, in part, due to Afghan concerns about the possible Iranian influence on the political and ideological output of any such channel.⁵⁶ In 2011, the Iranian ambassador to Tajikistan stated that Iran was fully ready to cooperate and that Iran and Tajikistan would "go it alone" on the project if necessary.⁵⁷ However, obstacles remain in implementing the project. Indeed, despite the cultural commonalities of the three states, their values, interests, tastes and state policies vary.⁵⁸ For example, while it is mandatory for women television presenters to wear a headscarf on Iranian TV, such practice would not be considered the norm in secular Tajikistan. At the time of writing this paper the TV station is yet to air its first broadcast.

Despite there once again being a more significant declaratory record than tangible initiatives in the ground, the attempts to establish a Persian-speaking union does evidence the utility of culture, and in this case common cultural identity more specifically as a base from which to build relations. As

⁴⁸ See: "Iranian Embassy Opens Culture Chamber at Tajik University," *BBC Monitoring Central Asia*, 7 July, 2006.

⁴⁹ See: "Iran Seeks to Gain Influence in Central Asia," *The Star News Service*, 27 July, 2006.

⁵⁰ See: "Iranian Influence in Tajikistan, Afghanistan," *BBC Monitoring Central Asia*, 9 November, 2005.

⁵¹ See: "Afghanistan, Iran and Tajikistan Probe Closer Economic Ties," *Eurasia Insight*, 6 August, 2006, available at [<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav080706.shtml>].

⁵² See: "Iran Leader Calls for Expansion of Ties among Persian Speaking Countries," *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, 8 May, 2007.

⁵³ See: S. Medrea, "Persian-Speaking Union Created by Afghanistan, Iran, Tajikistan," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, Vol. 10, No. 7, April 2008, pp. 15-17.

⁵⁴ See: "Afghanistan, Iran and Tajikistan Probe Closer Economic Ties."

⁵⁵ See: E. Gaber, "Turkey in the Caucasus and Central Asia: The Post-Soviet Period," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Vol. 12, Issue 3, 2011, pp. 138-147.

⁵⁶ Comments of former senior official at Radio Television Afghanistan, RTA, speaking on condition of anonymity, see: "Persian Language TV Channel Stalled," *Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR)*, 21 April, 2010, available at [<http://iwpr.net/report-news/persian-language-tv-channel-stalled>].

⁵⁷ See: "Report from Iranian station 'Radio Khorasan'," *BBC Monitoring Central Asia*, 24 March, 2011.

⁵⁸ See: S. Medrea, *op. cit.*

Naghībzādeh observes, the attempt at establishing a Union of Persian-Speaking Nations can be seen as “a means of both expanding Iran’s influence and also acting as a doorway to the world for the region.”⁵⁹ Nourzhanov highlights the necessity of Tajikistan to balance its foreign policy and security priorities, and that while the cultural angle may have been useful initially, the Tajik position is one driven by a pragmatic realism.⁶⁰ The same could be argued for Iran, insofar as its courting of relations with Tajikistan provided it with a firm foothold in the region and also meant that Iran had a close ally at a time when U.S.-led efforts at containment has left it isolated internationally.

Ahmadinejad has been noted as engendering a “re-awakening of common Persian bonds”⁶¹ between Iran, Tajikistan (and Afghanistan) and emphasizing these as a means for expanding cooperation with Tajikistan. However, as the previous initiatives since Tajikistan’s independence demonstrate, this was more of a continuation, albeit a concerted one, of efforts to enhance cultural cooperation between the two states, rather than any new-found ambition. With Afghanistan seemingly reluctant to fully commit to a clearer union between the three countries, Iran has pressed on with further enhancing its ties with Tajikistan. Ahmadinejad’s successor Hassan Rouhani has spoken of his desire to deepen relations,⁶² and Iran’s out-going ambassador to Tajikistan has been quoted as saying that cultural relations are likely to expand further during the Rouhani presidency.⁶³

Assessing Iranian Cultural Foreign Policy toward Central Asia

Because Iran is not able to compete economically, nor offer a political base, it has had to separate cultural influence from political and economic influence on its policy making toward the region.⁶⁴ However, this does not mean that Iran acts purely as a munificent neighbor, benevolently handing out free books and funding cultural projects. Iran’s interests in the region are rooted in its historical connections which foster a sense of cultural leadership and can be seen in its various cultural ventures in Central Asia. Therefore, while the above may point to seemingly benign activities in the region on Iran’s part, it should be noted that such moves are not without problems of their own. As an established, sovereign nation Iran was well-placed in the 1990s to press its claims for the cultural assets of the Persian-speaking world and to a lesser extent wider region. However, over time there have been more confident assertions of claims to certain cultural figures, particularly in the Persianate world. Hence we can observe Tajikistan’s embracing of the great Persian poet Rudakī, as a means of helping its nation-building project, much to the chagrin of Iranian media,⁶⁵ and similar moves on Afghanistan’s part in terms of Mawlana (Rumi).

⁵⁹ A. Naghibzādeh, “Irān, kānūn-e chand zir-e system-e mateghe-ye” (Iran at the Center of a Regional Subsystem), *motāleāt urāsīā-ye markazi* (Central Asian Studies), Vol. 2, Issue 5, 2009, pp. 139-152.

⁶⁰ See: K. Nourzhanov, “Omnibalancing in Tajikistan’s Foreign Policy: Security-Driven Discourses of Alignment with Iran,” *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3, 2012, pp. 363-381.

⁶¹ B. Clark, op. cit.

⁶² See: “Hassan Rohani Intends to Deepen Relations with Tajikistan,” *The Times of Central Asia*, 24 July, 2013.

⁶³ See: “Safir-e irān dar tājikestān khodāhāfezi kard (Iran’s Ambassador in Tajikistan bids farewell),” *moassese-ye motāleāt-e irān va eurāsīā (IRAS)* (Institute of Iran and Eurasia Studies), 14 October, 2013, available at [<http://www.iras.ir/vdcipzap.t1azz2bcct.html>].

⁶⁴ See: A. Naghibzādeh, op. cit.

⁶⁵ This is a point that has raised hackles in Tehran (see, for example, state-run Press TV’s annoyance with the BBC’s reference to “Tajik Poet Rudakī” in “BBC Distorts Iran’s History,” 16 November, 2007, available at [<http://www.presstv.ir/Detail.aspx?id=31295§ionid=351020105>]).

The pragmatism shown in Iran's approach to Central Asia helps to highlight a different face to Iranian foreign policy. It shows that Iran can act according to international norms and also play a constructive role that is in marked contrast to its perception as a non-conformist actor or "trouble maker" in international affairs. It also demonstrates the multi-dimensional approach of Iranian foreign policy makers in emphasizing different aspects of the relationship. There is a realization that Iran can exert an influence by drawing on its cultural levers and potentially expand its influence. While under international sanctions, Iran has found it necessary to maintain, or even attempt to advance its position by emphasizing its cultural weight. This is not only reflection of national identity and pride in its own civilizational heritage, but also something that can be utilized as a constructive track in Iran's foreign diplomacy. It is interesting to note though that the Central Asian state with which Iran has the least developed cultural relationship is Uzbekistan, thus showing how cultural relations can be stymied by complicated geopolitical relationships.

Conversely, this could also be seen as a rather superficial aspect of Iranian foreign policy, perhaps as a gloss or veneer to put on relations with the region. Iran has chosen to emphasize cultural closeness and draws on its historical legacy in the region but this is highly selective. It could be argued that this is merely a means to a material end. Such moves may therefore be seen as helping to pave the way for greater cooperation in more tangible, practical areas that better serve Iran's national interest. Although Iran continues to use multi-lateral groupings such as ECO as a means of circumventing its international isolation and the historical American-led efforts at containment, it is arguably having greater success pursuing ties on a bi-lateral level. Tajikistan has been a key focus of this, along with Afghanistan, and this is where Iranian economic investment is most prominent. It is perhaps no coincidence that the two countries with which Iran shares the closest cultural and linguistic links are also becoming the main focus of its attention in the region.

The study of the role of culture in Iran's relations with the region also sheds light upon the importance of actors such as the ICRO in Iran's international diplomacy. While the preceding analysis has shown that bulk of Iran's public diplomacy in the region is still carried out in the context of bi-lateral meetings of presidents and ministerial delegations, the majority of actual initiatives "on the ground" are being carried out through Iran's cultural centers under the guidance of the ICRO. As noted previously, this organization is directly answerable to the Supreme Leader's office and therefore acts as an important conduit for maintaining the international influence of that particular section of the Islamic Republic's complex power structure. However, this does not necessarily equate to competition with the office of president or Ministry of Foreign Affairs as far as Iran's relations with Central Asia are concerned. On the contrary, this can be seen as an example of reasonably harmonious relations across the Iranian foreign policy and diplomatic apparatus, and evidences the important role of culture in Iran's international relations.

Conclusion

Ultimately there remains little appetite for Iranian leadership in the region and Iran is aware of this, but the use of cultural links and shared heritage can still act as a symbol of Iran's other, more pragmatic style of foreign diplomacy, one that is far removed from the media focus on support for Hezbollah and historically antagonistic relations with the West over the nuclear issue. This paper has shown how Iran has sought to maintain a wide-ranging foreign policy approach toward Central Asia, drawing on its perceived trump card of culture when the currents of international affairs and world opinion have arguably been against the Islamic Republic. Indeed, maintaining friendly relations with the majority of Central Asian nations remains a diplomatic success for a state often treated as a pariah and could perhaps serve as a template for improving more problematic relationships in the future.

Furthermore, the recent, tentatively positive trajectory of relations between Iran and the West in light of the developments in nuclear negotiations may also have a positive effect on Iran's position in Central Asia. Possible sanctions relief may well make Iran appear more attractive as an international partner, and if full-scale normalization does occur, then Iran is well-positioned to finally make use of its oft-trumpeted geographical location and act as a significant gateway to the region.
