

# Iran and Central Asia: A Cultural Perspective<sup>1</sup>

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One of the most important tools utilized by states to maximize their impact in foreign affairs is public diplomacy and to this extent, public diplomacy is considered a source of soft power. The robust use of public diplomacy can enhance and reinforce the soft power of countries. Central Asia is among the regions that have an ever increasing relevance to regional and international affairs in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, and is currently considered a critical subsystem for our country. The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran towards this region is, on one hand, built on the foundation of converging factors in political, economic, and cultural arenas and looking towards opportunities for influence and cooperation. On the other hand, considering the divergent components, it also faces challenges and threats, the sum of which continues to effect the orientation of Iranian foreign policy towards the region. This article will study Iranian public diplomacy in this region and examine the opportunities and challenges, as well as, provide and proper model for a successful public diplomacy in the region of Central Asia, while taking into account the Islamic Republic of Iran's tools and potential.

**Keywords:** Public diplomacy, foreign affairs, Central Asia, Islamic Republic of Iran

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## **Introduction**

One of the most important tools utilized by states to maximize their impact on global affairs is public diplomacy and to this extent, public diplomacy is considered a source of soft power. The robust use of public diplomacy can enhance and reinforce the soft power of a country. Given Iran's history in civilization, culture, and religion, the country has a significant amount of potential for soft power. If Iran were to concentrate, plan to exploit and deploy these potential sources, it can become a successful case in the utilizations of public diplomacy and soft power in the region. Central Asia is among regions that have an ever increasing relevance to regional and international affairs following the collapse of the Soviet Union and is currently considered a critical sub system for our country. The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is on one hand built on the foundation of converging elements in political, economic, and cultural arenas with opportunities for influence and cooperation. On the other hand, considering the divergent components, it also faces challenges and threats, the sum of which continues to effect the orientation of Iranian foreign policy towards the region. (Alavian, Koozegar Koleji, 2009, 66).

The region of Eurasia, which includes Central Asia and the Caucuses, has taken on a greater significance in the new century primarily due to having important energy resources and controlling some connecting routes between East and West. In the past, the control of the Soviet Union over this region allowed the United States and other forces little opportunity to maneuver. But with the

disintegration of the Soviet Union, a power vacuum emerged and regional rivalries and crises intensified, many of whom like the Chechnya crisis and the Karabakh crisis have their roots in distant history but then reemerged. During this period, due to unique regional circumstances, many different forces, foreign and domestic, were able to play a role in the regions affairs and turmoil (Boualverdi, 2006, 46).

For the Islamic Republic of Iran, these recent developments have created the opportunity to emerge from the long shadow of its superpower neighbor after many years and establish its own independent relationship with its neighbors. While these developments were occurring, new threats also emerged for Iranian national security due to the presence of trans-regional players. Russia as well, considers this region to be its sphere of influence and is weary of the presence of other players. In their midst, many Western countries, especially the United States of America, consider the Eurasia region critical to their foreign policy strategy and seek to enhance their influence in Central Asia to complete the rings of Eurasia. Following the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> and the inception of the war of terror, the construction of American military bases in the region and the subsequent presence of the U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan created new geopolitical circumstances in Central Asia that involved both challenges and opportunities.

Considering that Central Asia has a special place in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran and also considering the vast presence of regional and trans-regional competitors, this research, using analytic methods, will seek to provide an answer to the question of what capacity does Iran have to enhance its soft power in this region, and what strategies must be pursued in order to enhance and realize these opportunities? What are the most important goals, opportunities, and challenges regarding the cultural relationship between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the countries of Central Asia? And what methods can allow for cultural diplomacy to elevate

the cultural presence of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the region?

### **I. Conceptual Framework**

The meaning of soft power “soft power oriented approach” creates a new discourse that calls for the revisiting and reassessment of the theory of power, sources of power and even the tools of imposing power; and therefore presents a new image of power (Nye, 2011, 7). The outcome of Soft power is described in certain quarters as a color revolution, or a velvet revolution, or change in norms, changing of values and benefiting from peaceful methods to create the desired modification in the opponent’s subjective and objective conditions, its opposite is hard power that is analyzed in the framework of power oriented theories. According to the definition of Max Weber, “power” is the ability to impose ones will on the other (Golbright, 2011, 22). In fact, power is a type of physical or meta-physical capability and presents those who wield it with the capacity to modify the thinking, understanding, vote, viewpoint, and behavior of others. By contrast, hard power refers to the causing of a kind of subordination through the imposition of “aggression” in which, subordination is the result of “tyranny.” In other words, the process and mechanisms with which votes are changed or subordination of the rival of the nation with power is described in a process with the nature of hard power. The tools used to impose force as well, the fear of punishment for disobedience or the hope of benefiting from obedience to the powerful side is demonstrated in the framework of the discourse of hard and non-peaceful instruments.

One the other hand, sometimes hard power and soft power reinforce one another and often they interfere with one another. Dick Cheney, former Vice President of the United States, in response to the terrorist attacks of Al-Qaeda against the US, reasoned that a strong military response would frighten them away from future attacks. Without question, the hard power of the military and police forces were necessary to confronting Al-Qaeda, however, the

pervasive use of hard power in the invasion of Iraq, the images of the Abu Ghraib prison, and the extrajudicial detentions being carried out at the Guantanamo Bay facility contributed to an increase in the number of terrorist fighters, and the absence of an effective soft power element, undermined the process of reaction (Nye, 2004, 91).

The change in the approaches of powers from hard power to soft power is the product of the shape and nature of global developments in the arena of international relations in the aftermath of the Cold War. In the analysis of Barry Buzan, the significance of the ending of the Cold War for Western powers and their close allies in the nucleus of international political economics, was the quick and likely long term turning away from deep military security concerns, and rather becoming consumed with a series of security concerns, mostly civilian, that were far wider, more dispersed, and less understood (Buzan, 2009, 29). The effect of this on the agenda of international security was a need for change in the instruments and procedures, including a change of approach from hard power to soft power that is itself a product of change from hard threats to soft threats.

As previously referenced, the topic of soft power was first mentioned in the context of an independent theoretical framework in 1990 by Joseph Nye, with regards to an examination of the nature and consequences of American power (Nye, 1991). In his assessment, America's role is mainly not to use its potential as a superpower and utilize its significant resources to control the political environment and force other nations to behave as America would like them to (the same classic interpretation of power that Max Webber defined as the capability to impose one's will on others), but rather the use of smart power and legitimize its policies amongst other governments. He refers to this type of power as "the second face of power."

Soft power can in a general way be considered the organizing an ideological, political, and social framework and creating change in attitudes, beliefs, and norms, in a long term process that can broadly

be defined as including all non-violent methods to apply power, resulting in change in the thinking and behavior of opposing the society in a way that brings it in line with the desire of the powerful. Therefore, soft power includes cultural, ideological, political, and artistic components (Joseph, 2004). With this description, the logic of soft power finds meaning in instances like “non-violent action,” “civil disobedience,” “democratic revolution,” “piecemeal social engineering,” “blood-less coup”, “peaceful government revolution,” and “soft overthrow,” and has a complex, composite nature (Tajik, 2009, 51). In other words, the logic of soft power understands special practices including entering into projects that are civilian in nature and processes that focus on orientation, attitudes, conceptions, beliefs, norms, and values. Therefore, if one powerful player uses the resources at its disposal to convince its audience (in the country it is trying to effect) on a national and transnational level to accept its decision or to produce behavior that it favors, using the aforementioned methods, the powerful player has in a way, been able to establish its favored order inside the contacted society or rival power structure.

Some examples of the tools being utilized in the referred to plans are as follows: management of creations and dissemination of information with specific objectives; psychological operations and political propaganda; public diplomacy with non-governmental actors or second layer diplomacy and the integration of them, as well as, media diplomacy (International Study and Research Institute Abrar Moaser Tehran, 2004, 52-55); white coup or velvet revolution created by organizing protest rallies, public strikes, the production of material, books, bulletins, and pamphlets with a specific orientation; the providing of humanitarian assistance with specific political goals; political, promotional, financial, and educational support of the domestic opposition of countries; symbolic moves such specific statements and declarations, Representation in special cases and iconic award; organized lobby composed of the professional elite and

dissident intellectuals of the target country; mainstreaming, with emphasis on support for the political, scientific, artistic, and cultural elite outside of the center of power of the target country; developing a propaganda apparatus such as creating and managing audio and video media outlets that can be reached easily, quickly, and free of charge, initiating a media war; gaining influence through international regimes such as human rights, democracy, and attractive concepts of universality.

## II. Civilizational and Cultural Ties

The people of Central Asia have greatly contributed to history, a history that, due to there being little documentation, is not well known in Iran. In our own country's history, the names of peoples such as the Massagetae, the Saka, and the Alan appear. For example, we know that Cyrus went to war against the Massagetae and was killed during these hostilities. The curious reader may be tempted to seek more information about this old and relatively unknown clan, however, except for in a few sources like "The Histories" by Herodotus, there is little in known information about them (Behzadi, 1994, 12). Therefore, the first historical accounts relating to Central Asia and the people of this region were brought to us by Herodotus, who gathered the bulk of his knowledge of this region from his travels to Western Asia. Regarding this issue, there exists an even older source, the Avesta (Balantisky, 1992, 79). The study of inscriptions is an important source of knowledge regarding the initial inhabitants of Central Asia. These inscriptions were emblazoned on cliffs and edifices by Achaemenian kings, the most important of them being the Bisotoun.

Despite this, the Islamic Era became a fruitful time of cultural engagement between Iran and Central Asia. Central Asia encountered many highs and lows during this period, and in the span between the 16th and 19th centuries, Transoxania and Western Turkistan did not share a common political history. Therefore, each government must

be examined separately, but their commonalities must also be considered. Some of these commonalities are so strong that they even transverse political borders. For example, the area of common law can be considered. Welfare measures, proscribed by Islam, that provided some financial relief to ordinary people were not limited to the mosque or the school, and extended to organizations such as the hospice organization in Sofia for sustenance, academics affairs, and others (Spuler, 2000, 26). There are many issues that should be considered regarding the common historic and cultural past of Iran and the Central Asia region including:

Looking for common ground, friendship and regional connectedness, and looking passed all religious, historic, geographical, and social commonalities between Iranians and Central Asians, especially since the disintegrations of the Soviet Union, the Persian language can be cited amongst important focal points in the convergence and cultural unity of Iran and Central Asia.

Historically, the Persian language has had a special place in Uzbekistan. In the era of Muhammad Shibani, he had, despite his difficulties with Ismael Shah Savafi, a strong familiarity with the Persian language and sought to surround himself with many poets and writers, and supported artists like Khalil Harati (Mir-Ahmadi, 1993, 73-79).

In Tajikistan as well, the Persian language has historically been an official language, its writing has had many applications, and it can also be considered a factor in the rebuilding of Tajikistan's national identity. Despite the tumult that has occurred in Tajikistan, the Persian language has survived. But one must not forget that the arena of Persian language and literature in Central Asia has sustained tremendous damage during the seventy year reign of the Communist regime, and lead to many changes in the non-Russian Republics. In Tajikistan, this change began with conversion of Persian and Arabic alphabet into a type of modified Persian and Arabic. After that, the Latin alphabet became popular and eventually, in 1939-40, the



Russian Cyrillic alphabet replaced Persian and Arabic alphabets (Mortazavian, 1995, 42-43).

Also, in the Republic of Kyrgyzstan, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, efforts to revive the Persian language in this republic were made by those with great interest in the language, including the establishment of a Persian language course at the Faculty of Orientalism of the Bishkek Humanities University in 1992, which began its work with the acceptance of 10 students. Currently, the program has about 35 students. Another institution involved with the promotion of the Persian language is the Faculty of Orientalism of the National University of Kyrgyzstan that was launched with eight female students. Also, the Persian language laboratory of this program was opened on May 8th, 1996, with the presence of members of the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Kyrgyzstan and our nation's cultural representative in Almaty (Ma'zami-Godarzi, 1998, 16-159).

Khorasan has enjoyed significant cultural and economic ties with Central Asia over the course of history, in particular, during Iran's Islamic history, due to its placement along the Silk Road. If we geographically consider Central Asia to be vast territories stretching from the Caspian Sea to Mongolia and China, Khorasan's geographic and cultural role with respect to Central Asia becomes clear (Ahmadian, 1994, 40). We should also consider that Central Asia has no direct access to international waters. The path through Khorasan and its neighbor province Sistan and Baluchestan is, especially with the construction of the new 185 mile light rail line connecting Mashhad in Iran and Tejen in Turkmenistan, the shortest land route to open international waters, the Persian Gulf, and the Indian Ocean (Sabri Tabrizi, 1997, 59). In general, Iran has a 1500 Kilometer border Turkmenistan and geographically most of that is in Khorasan (Mahmoudi, 1997, 8).

Khorasan has naturally had a central role in the strengthening of ties between Iran and Central Asia, and is ideally positioned to play a

role in the economic activities between the two. Mashhad has been, over the last century, a focal point of many political and economic developments relating to Afghanistan and Central Asia, and is now, due its economic potential and geographic location, well positioned to revive and promote its interests accordingly. Central Asia has the largest fossil fuel reserves in the world after the Persian Gulf and Siberia, with Turkmenistan leading Central Asia in output. In fact much of Iran's natural gas production comes from Khorasan. The two refineries of Turkmenistan are located in Kerasnodesk and the eastern city of Chaharjoo. The transit route of refined gas from Kerasnodesk is naturally through the Caspian Sea, however, the closest and most cost effective transit route for the refined gas of the Chaharjoo facility, for entrance into international markets, may be through the Khorasan and Sistan and Baluchestan provinces (Shonehchi, 1999, 167-168). Other means of connectivity by way of Khorasan can be the construction of light rail line that connects Central Asia to the Oman Sea through Iran's eastern borders, as originally envisioned by Russian officer Captain Ritch in the beginning of the 20th Century (P.172). Also, Khorasan's cultural role in Central Asia must not be neglected, as it is the entrance of Islam into the region.

In ancient Iran, which included parts of Central Asia, Iranian society had unique cultural and civilization traits, (Takmeel Homayoun, 1994, 136) and those traits are still a common bond between Iran and Central Asia. Nowruz celebrations that have a long standing history in Iran and Central Asia are celebrated in all 5 Central Asian Republics and is an example of cultural connectivity between our countries. For example, we will examine the Nowruz celebrations of the Tajik people. It's important to mention that during the Islamic period many communities have also celebrated Nowruz as a religious holiday. This is particularly the case not only in modern day Iran but in certain regions of Central Asia including Tajikistan. Nowruz has been celebrated in the eras of the Ghaznavids, Seljuk,

Kharazmshahian, and even in the violent and depredated era of the Mongols, Ashtrkhanyans, and Sheibanis.

The Tajiks, like other ethno-Iranians, carry on certain traditions and practices during Nowruz celebrations; and Bukhara, Samarkand, and some other areas are the site of pre-Nowruz ceremonies for girls called "*Bakht Gosbaei*."<sup>1</sup> Bukhara, Samarkand, Khujand, Kulob, Hesar, Badakhshan, and the valleys of Gharatgin are other places in which people present flowers to one another, spray rosewater, and give out beverages and sweets during Nowruz. Nowruz also has long tradition and is widely celebrated in the Republic of Turkmenistan (Bualverdi, 2006, 97).

Most of the population of Central Asia is Muslim and even the Tartars, who are by Muslims of the European and Siberian parts of the Soviet Union, live in this area (Mahmoudi, 2007, 7). In general, Islam has been and continues to be the most common religion in the region. To the extent that Central Asia deeply maintained its religious orientation, it became a refuge for many Muslims seeking safe haven from political persecution. Until the point when communism emerged, religion played a major role in the identity of the people of Central Asia. Even though Sunni Islam is common in Central Asia, it is not the only Islamic orientations. In Bukhara there is a large and important Shiite community that has historic ties to Khorasan. Many of the people of this unique community are the descendents of merchant families. Though the numbers of these communities are not many, they have been critical in maintaining the Persian language and relations with Iran (Nowruzi, 2006, 49).

Regarding the issue of Islam being a factor that connects Iran and Turkmenistan, it should be noted, that Islam came to Turkmenistan through Iran. Though after 70 years of Communist rule and propaganda religious tendencies are not strong, the people of this country stayed true to their origins and considered being Muslim part of their national identity. Iranian Islamic identity has tremendous weight in Turkmen society (Bualverdi, 2006, 96-97).

Most of the Population of Kyrgyzstan is Muslim and Shiite Muslims in Kyrgyzstan fall under several categories, most of them are Ithna Asheri Shiite. There have been Mosques in cities such as Bishkek and Osh for a long time, and in 1991, 60 Mosques were opened and 18 Mosques were reopened (Moazami Godarzi, 1998, 35-36).

The people of the region were always under attack by desert dwelling clans, and the region has included numerous ethnicities, also, over the course of history the centers of regional power have constantly shifted. Those who reside on the east side of the Caspian Sea or the people of Central Asian (Tansoxania and Khorasan) are the various Aryans of the region who have lived under the banner Central Asian tribes and nations and integrated into their cultures and then brought about the robust cultures and civilizations of the regions past. In the 19th century, a number of Iranians moved to Central Asia. Among the immigrants were the Farsi speaking descendents of the residents of Marv, the children of the soldiers of Nader Shah, the deserting soldiers of the Qajar Dynasty, artisans, merchants, and the descendents of nobles who had been captured during the incursions into the Iranian border region. In the final quarter of the 19th century, farmers, ranchers, and merchants from Iran's northern regions including Gilan, Khorasan, Azerbaijan, and Kurdistan gradually formed a new group in Central Asia that eventually became the largest group of Iranian emigrants, so much so, that in 1890, that Iranian Immigrants composed 29 percent of the non-native population of Central Asia. They did not sever their ties with Iran and always maintained a strong and dynamic relationship with Iranians inside Iran, to the point that they were not asked for passports when crossing the border (Takmeel Homyun, 1995, 27).

### III. Cultural Perspective

The disintegration of the Soviet Union, provided an unwanted independence to the Republics of Central Asia; and they were initially

confronted with political unpreparedness regarding their new political circumstances, in both the domestic and foreign policy arena. In this section we will examine the most important issues and culturally connective factors between Iran and the region of Central Asia.

Culture is the lifestyle that serves to define a system of thought and values and the framework of individual and social living. The cultural shape and dimensions of Iran and Central Asia have as their basis the rulers of the Achaemenid Empire and even rulers preceding them. In his famous inscription, Naqsh-e Rostam, Darius, along with other dependant territories of his Empire, cites bakh, Soguda, and Khwarezm as Iranian cities. This is also confirmed by Greek and Roman historians. These relationships were further reinforced and solidified by the Ashkani and Samani dynasties. But the highpoint of relations between Iran and Central Asia came in the Islamic era when great philosophers and scientists came to be, such as Avicenna, Farabi, Abu-Rayhan Biruni, and poets such as Rudaki and Balkhi (Jaffari Dehgi, 2006).

Though in the 20th century, the thought and value system of the people of Central Asia experienced many challenges due to the rule of the Communist regime, they have maintained their fundamental underpinnings. In the final decade of the 20th century, with the freeing of the Central Asian countries from the communist grip of the Soviet Union, opportunities for cultural exchange between these countries and other nations expanded tremendously.

Expansion of cultural relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Central Asian countries began and was placed on the agenda of Iranian officials in the days immediately following the independence of these countries. Iran was in fact one of three countries who first recognized their independence, and in accordance with that, established diplomatic relations with them and subsequently built cultural offices in four out of five Republics, outlining and highlighting Iran's special advantages in many areas in Central Asia (Ibrahimi Tarkaman, 2006).

An overview of the region can shed light on many of the examples of these advantages and cultural commonalities between the two sides. “The existence of religious commonalities, with the presence of 42 million Muslims (despite differences in religion), language commonalities in the sub-dialects of the Persian language, especially in Tajikistan, the city of Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan, the presence of cultural similarities, especially in Tajikistan, the Fergana valley on the banks of the Zeravshan river, and Samarkand and Bukhara in Uzbekistan, as well as Marv and Ashkhabad, are examples of these commonalities in the cultural arena. These elements have brought together Iran and the Central Asian countries in the cultural arena and resulted in kinship and understanding amongst them. Therefore, the cultural arena is one of the most important foundations with which Iran can increase the level and scope of cooperation with the countries of this region, and while restoring its geoculture in Central Asia, create the groundwork for further convergence in the arena of foreign policy with these countries .

As previous stated, soft power is the use of tools such as culture, ideology, ideals, and values to affect indirectly the behavior and interests of other countries. Therefore, the success of governments in the using the dimensions of soft power will vary in different countries and regions based on cultural, religious, political, and social features and circumstances. Central Asia has its greatest historic, religious, and cultural relationships with Iran, and therefore, considering the vast interests of Iran in the region, the Islamic Republic of Iran’s influence in the region can be reinforced and positive results can be reached with the utilization of public diplomacy. Iran has a tremendous capacity to reap the benefits of public diplomacy; features of this capacity are as follows:

Iran has significant cultural and scientific potential in areas such as language and the Farsi literature, faculty and student exchange, and tourism, to this point, cultural centers outside of the country are extremely important. The illustration of an accurate image of the

revolution and the government to the people of the world is an important responsibility of Iran's cultural ambassadors. Also, the reinforcement of certain elements civilization such as mythology, ancient rituals, language, and culture, especially in Central Asia that is part of the Iranian civilization region, can help expand Iranian influence amongst the people of Central Asia (Dadandish, 2011: 146). These rituals include Nowruz, which is an ancient traditions and common practice of all countries in this geographic area. Considering that the government of Iran is established on the basis of Islamic ideology, the establishment of it has created a unique attraction in today's world, especially in the Islamic world. In fact, one of the factors that can create and amplify Iran's soft power is the attractiveness and desirability of the political and ideological nature of a country. One of the key challenges facing Central Asia countries is their lack of access to open waters that limits their access to international markets and serves as a barrier to economic growth and the ability to transport their oil and natural gas to global buyers, for those of whom who have such energy reserves (Akhavan-Khazemi, 2011: 8). This has resulted in these nations establishing relationships with their neighbors to promote economic and trade cooperation, but also to use them as a transit route to gain access to international markets. Undoubtedly, Iran is one of the primary and most important countries with regards to this issue for the leaders of Central Asian countries. In fact, in this respect, both sides have much to gain from such cooperation. Central Asia is a potential point of origin for investment in Iran and its markets are suitable for the sale of Iranian made products and the investment of large Iranian companies (Beheshtipour, 2010).

The history of Central Asia and the Caucuses involving their Islamic culture and traditions is very much tied to Iran, and many of the areas that are now considered independent Republics were once part Iran (Alireza, 1992: 193). Therefore, Iranian cultural roots in the region are strong to the extent that despite the 70 year long effort of

Communist rulers, the identity of the people is still considered an Iranian identity. The depth of these ties not only lead to the leaders of these former Soviet Republics to frequently express spiritual power of Iranian culture in their countries; but many Muslims in the region, when seeking to gain greater prestige, speak of their own personal affinity for Iranian culture. It was in fact these tendencies and the political credo of “not Eastern, not Western”, as well as the proliferation of revolutionary thoughts in other countries that caused Iran to be seen as a threat to the Soviet Union.

Despite the Soviet Union’s efforts to block the influence of the Islamic Revolution’s idealistic thinking in the region; religious, ethnic, and cultural commonalities played an important role in the Islamic Revolution’s effect on these countries, and the resurgence of Islam and practical adherence to Islam in these societies. The Islamic revolution had some very attractive features for the people of the region, so much so that it endangered the interests of the Soviet Union. These features include: the anti-imperialist dimension of the Islamic Revolution, the populist nature and the promise to set aside the old corrupt bureaucracies and instead promote a new generation of grassroots leaders ... (Kadivar, 2000, 129). In this context, certain developments, like the presence of people in Mosques and the elevation of Imam Khomeini into a political symbol in the region, caused the politicians of the Soviet Union to express their concerns regarding the emergence of political Islam – Inevitable consequence of the growing relationship between these Republics and Iran – and continuously try to disassociate Muslims in the Soviet Union from Iran (Muhammadi, 2006: 357).

The Islamic awakening in Central Asia was confronted with the disintegration of the Soviet Union before it could reach maturity and present itself as a powerful political force against the Communist Party. The crumbling of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and the independence of its Republics in Central Asia and the Caucasus, was a major world event and could have led to the establishment of



Islam as a suitable replacement for Communist ideology. The prospect of the revival of Islam and revolutionary Islam so shook the West that it resulted in the united effort of western countries, particularly the United States, to establish close ties to these countries on economic and political groups as a means of limiting the influence of Iran. They then presented Turkey as a model modern country, with free markets and the total separation of religion and politics, for these countries to indirectly follow as a model for their policies in the region (Heshmatzadeh, 2009: 203).

Iran, at this time, was unable to present itself as an ideological and practical model for the Islamic societies and governments of the region due to its continuing to suffer from the crises resulting from war. This cost Iran influence among the Muslim Republics, while it was also competing for influence in these tumultuous countries with other Islamic countries, as well as, Russia, America, Israel, and Europe (Muhammadi, 2009:377).

The Islamic Republic of Iran can take on many roles as an actor in Central Asia. Iran, as a government-society, as a culture and civilization, and as one of the central Islamic civilizations can be beneficial to this region and at the same time pursue interests relating to this role (Karami, 2008: 79). To this extent, the relationship between Iran and these countries in the framework of already existing regional organizations is an important dimension to this relationship. Iran is a country that neighbors several regions. Each of these regions has its own security challenges that result in a chaotic atmosphere and an enduring tumultuousness in Iran's peripheral regions. This condition contributes to the presence of extraterritorial and international forces in these regions. From Iran's viewpoint, the presence of foreign forces, presents a risk to the security of Iran and the region. However, in order for the nations of a region to achieve regional security, there must be a regional security plan. Iran's efforts to reinforce the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and become a member of this body is to be understood in this framework

(Sadgadpour, 2004: 24)

In this context, according to many Russian experts, with regards to Iran's regional policies towards Central Asian countries, one can speak of the enduring of an old strategy. In particular that Iran has tried to balance its anti-American Anti-Israeli posture with its efforts to cooperate with regional and international organizations, and has therefore increased the importance of Central Asia in its foreign policy. Therefore, in addition to political-security interests, in the years after the independence of the Central Asian countries, cultural interests became an ever greater focus of Iran's attention. These interests include common customs, common religion, and an affinity for the Farsi language in the region (Sanaei, 1996: 23), although these issues were never the primary focus of the foreign policy of Iran.

Recent global developments have emphasized the importance of international cooperation in confronting various threats, many of whom have taken on a global dimension. Under these circumstances, regional organizations have found a renewed relevance and ECO is one such organization. The ECO culture institution is the cultural division of the ECO (Rezaei: 211). The ECO was initially a 3 nation body which included Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey as founding members, and was essentially the restoration of the Regional Cooperation for Development (RCD) that was established in 1963. The three founding members of the RCD were generally considered to be equals in terms of development and part of the Western block. The leaders of the three countries met in 1964 in Istanbul. They emphasized regional cooperation as the basis of growth, national development, and ensuring peace and stability and declared their historic and cultural ties as being the basis for the strengthening of their partnership.

The presence of cultural, historic, and religious heterogeneity, vast natural resources, and the ability to engage in scientific and technological exchange is of the many cooperative measures amongst ECO states. These countries, considering their own growth potential,

have a tremendous role in growing the activities of the organizations. Today ECO countries cover a large geographic region and the organization brings together their many cultures and histories. But despite these deep ties, there have been few opportunities for artists and scholars from these lands to come together and work to expand and strengthen their shared cultural foundations. Restoring the historic moral values of the region, guarding of common literary traditions, art and philosophy, and protecting the deeply rooted identity of the region can be considered a valuable barrier against the foreign cultural invasion and its negative global consequences, and are the primary focus points for future collaborations on a regional level (Rezaei: 212).

The culture institute of ECO, based in Tehran, is of tremendous significance as it stands as the only regional cultural institution in the area. The political-geographic success of the Islamic Republic of Iran, along with cultural partners and the ECO states, has further elevated its significance. This institution has taken on a broad scope of work involving many areas such as the fields of science, culture, art, education, athletics, and literature. It therefore must take advantage of collaboration opportunities, and the capacities and resources of any organizations, institutions, and establishments that are active in these fields. With the growing cultural cooperation amongst member states, in addition to enhanced cultural growth and sophistication, regional cooperation in other fields will also be reinforced. Publishing of books and cultural publications, the establishment of seminars, sports tournaments, exhibitions featuring art and crafts on a regional level can not only help create a better cultural and linguistic understanding amongst the people of the region, it can also be beneficial to the endeavor of the promotion, identification and optimal utilization of new areas in art and culture. Moreover, the cultural activities in the framework of ECO Cultural Institute can alleviate sensitivities and negative consequences associated with some bilateral cultural activities of the Islamic Republic of Iran in regional states (Haji-

Yousefi, 2012: 51).

In the past two decades a significant number of organizations and institutions have been established in the region and a large number of multilateral agreements have been signed. Each one became active in certain field for certain reasons, and over time experienced operational difficulty. One reason for this has been a lack of positive and strong outlook towards regionalism among regional elites. It is true that there is some tension amongst members of the ECO, however, these differences cannot seriously impede integration, rather, the cooperative priorities of the members and the international commitments of countries have become barriers to cooperation. Essentially, anytime members of the ECO experience tumult in their international relationships and lose their international partners, they move towards greater ECO involvement, however, in any other circumstances, the priority and preference of their elites lie with more powerful countries. For example, Turkey showed preference for ECO only after it was rejected for membership by the European Union. Central Asian countries and the Republic of Azerbaijan as well joined the ECO to overcome their internal problems and turned their backs on it at the first opportunity to form other strategic partnerships. Iran, as well, has not been an exception to this phenomenon. Iranian elites inside the country have faced difficulties such as a lack of consensus, a lack of proper understanding of previous, current, and future conditions, the disproportion of goals and capabilities, and a lack of institutional clarity in formulating foreign policy. The aforementioned have caused elites to not ascribe to the ECO the priority and the value that it needs. Turkey however, has managed to enhance its bilateral relations with countries in the region after overcoming difficulties and achieving economic growth. Though the ECO has contributed to the domestic and international station of national elites in ECO member states, the presence of regional and international competitor organizations have cause the elites to favor other forums for cooperation and deemphasize their activity in the

ECO (Haji-Yousefi: 42).

In addition to the grounds for convergence, there are also factor and areas of divergence in many political, security, economic, and cultural arenas confronting Iranian foreign policy in the Central Asia region. A clear understanding of these issues could serve as a point from which a realistic plan to further Iran's diplomatic interests can be designed. In this section we will, in a compressed manner, examine the most important factor and areas of divergence in the cultural arena.

In addition to factors that promote convergence, in the cultural arena, Iran is also confronted with some challenges as pertaining to its relations with Central Asia that need to be properly understood so that appropriate policies can be undertaken in order to minimize them. The contrast of Shiite and revolutionary Islam with Sunni Islam and the secular framework of the Central Asian governments, the cultural and linguistic influence of powers such as Russia and Turkey, vast anti-Iran propaganda from extra-regional powers such as Turkey and America should be considered important factors for divergence between Iran and the Republics of Central Asia. An important point to take into account, is that after the independence of these states, they found themselves inflicted with a crisis of identity and legitimacy and have taken up the process of "nation-building" and "state-building". Therefore, to compensate for the shortcomings, they began to engage in historiography, and at times, historical revisionism with the goal of presenting a new and independent identity to the region and the world.

Therefore, with the aim of provocation and seeking to support countries such as Azerbaijan, Turkey and the United States, took actions such as clearing the libraries of Samarkand and Bukhara of Farsi language books, expropriating the nationality of poets like Rudaki and Naser Khosro to Tajikistan, philosophers like Farabi to Kazakhstan, and scientists like Khwarizmi to Uzbekistan. Also unfortunately, distortions of history have been used in textbooks of

Central Asia, to illustrate a negative image of Iran as an expansionist country in the minds of students; this can have a very negative and destructive effect on the mindsets of future Central Asian managers and decision makers with regards to Iran.

Therefore, in order to benefit from the existing potential and minimize factors that hinder cultural cooperation, the Islamic Republic of Iran needs realistic planning and a chosen strategy that is simple and rational, and focused on the goal of reinforcing Iranian-Islamic culture rather than the dominance of the ideology of Islamic culture belonging to the Islamic Republic in intergovernmental foreign policy. Thereby, the role of the Iranian-Islamic cultural heritage is developed in contrast to Turkish nationalism and the challenges pertaining to competing with Western culture (Rahnama, 2006). Therefore, deepening cultural ties with Central Asian countries regarding cultural issues, that will then provide fertile ground for cooperation in other fields, rests on the ability to identify common cultural components amongst Iran and the countries of the region, including in fields such as linguistics, religion, historic, cultural heritage, and also on the understanding of the factors that threaten these collaborations like Islamic extremism and tribalism.

### Conclusion

In the cultural arena, considering Iran's vast cultural commonalities with the region, but also considering some of its differences, Iran can benefit from utilizing public diplomacy in the framework of soft power. Among all regional subsystems Central Asia presents Iran with unique opportunities in this respect, in contrast with the Caucasus, where European culture is dominant, and the lands south of the Persian Gulf, whose culture is steadfastly Arab. Therefore, caution must be observed regarding the political, economic, and security arenas, and any perspective framework designed for this region must consider Iran's cultural and civilization components as the primary vehicle for furthering Iranian foreign policy in the region. This is

because Iran's political developments emphasis on the faith of Islam – and not factional Sunni and Shiite matters – can create fertile ground for civilization collaboration, while also recognizing cultural distinctions in national development. Progressive evolution rather than radical changes, will determine the future of this country. Such a Contractile strategy is well suited and compatible with the new order of the world and the post cold war environment. Emphasis on native culture can provide a healthy opportunity to build reciprocal relationships in the civilizational field.

In total, it seems the following guidelines can assist in enhancing and deepening cultural relations between Iran and the countries of Central Asia: enhancement of cultural cooperation; avoiding the development of disruptive tensions; reinforcing cultural attributes; the correction of incorrect understandings of content of Iranian-Islamic culture; efforts to foster trust; making cultural planning and behavior compatible with the capacity of the region in which the activity is taking place; scientific cooperation, including the exchange of professors and students and establishing joint scientific conferences; establishment and expansion of Persian language departments at universities in Central Asian countries; the establishment of Iran oriented museums in the countries of the region; emphasis on special occasions like New Year and religious festivities and introducing them to young people by providing cultural programs; and illustrating a realistic image of Iran and Islam utilizing means such as the media, films.

Proper understanding and planning in the cultural arena, can lead to the conversion of threats into opportunities for the Persian identity in Central Asia.

## Notes

1. The term roughly translates to *opening fortune*

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