TITLE: TAJIKISTAN'S RELATIONS WITH IRAN AND AFGHANISTAN

AUTHOR: Muriel Atkin
George Washington University

THE NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR SOVIET AND EAST EUROPEAN RESEARCH
PROJECT INFORMATION:

CONTRACTOR: George Washington University
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Muriel Atkin
COUNCIL CONTRACT NUMBER: 806-18
DATE: November 9, 1992

COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

Individual researchers retain the copyright on work products derived from research funded by Council Contract. The Council and the U.S. Government have the right to duplicate written reports and other materials submitted under Council Contract and to distribute such copies within the Council and U.S. Government for their own use, and to draw upon such reports and materials for their own studies; but the Council and U.S. Government do not have the right to distribute, or make such reports and materials available, outside the Council or U.S. Government without the written consent of the authors, except as may be required under the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act 5 U.S.C. 552, or other applicable law.

* The work leading to this report was supported by contract funds provided by the National Council for Soviet and East European Research. The analysis and interpretations contained in the report are those of the author.
Executive Summary:
Tajikistan's Relations with Iran and Afghanistan

Today, many Tajiks living in the former Soviet Union are keenly aware that they are part of a larger Persian cultural world. Those who are active in politics in Tajikistan, whether the Communist old guard still trying to preserve its dominance or the various opposition groups, think that connections with that wider Persian world, especially in Iran and Afghanistan, can be useful to them. However, the kinds of links they emphasize and their purposes in doing so vary considerably.

The facet of this cross-border connection which is most discussed in the news media is religious, specifically that Tajiks in Tajikistan want to establish an Islamic state modeled on Iran with aid both from that country and from Afghanistan's mujahidin. However, that view relies excessively on garbled information and a certain amount of hostile propaganda. There is a certain amount of respect for Iran as a state which has, according to its own propaganda, gone from subordination to a foreign power to full independence and full freedom to live according to Islamic teachings. At the same time, most Tajiks, even advocates of Islamicizing politics, do not consider Iran's kind of Islamic state an appropriate example for Tajikistan to emulate. Stories that the current political turmoil in Tajikistan is the result of a plot to establish an Islamic "fundamentalist" state there fomented by Afghanistan's radical Islamicizers, the Hizb-i Islami, and supported by Hizb guerrillas fighting in Tajikistan are wildly exaggerated. These stories owe much to the propaganda of the
Communist hard-liners, which tries to deny any legitimate domestic basis for opposition to the old order.

Much of what interests Tajiks about the Persian-speaking world beyond their borders involves economics: investment, trade, and development projects for the poorest of the former Soviet republics. Another important part of the attraction is cultural. After decades of having their heritage reinterpreted and denigrated under the Soviet system and still fearful of dominance by their Turkic neighbors, Tajiks seek help from abroad in reinvigorating their language, literature, history, and arts.

In the context of a domestic political power struggle, which the hard-line government's own actions did much to turn violent, various contending groups have armed themselves, including by obtaining weapons from Afghanistan. This is true for supporters of the Communist old guard as well as some of the opposition. Their contacts in Afghanistan are not simply or even primarily members of the Hizb-i Islami but any one who has weapons to sell or barter; that applies to most of the adult males in a country bristling with weapons.

Tajikistan now faces immense problems. To deal with them, it is seeking cooperation and aid not only from Iran and Afghanistan but from as many countries as possible. Therefore, an important factor in determining which countries Tajikistan will deal with the most will be which countries give it the most assistance in deed, not just in lectures on what to do differently and unfulfilled promises. After prolonged domination by others, the Tajiks are not eager now to be dominated by a new foreign master. The cultural similarities among Tajikistan, Iran, and
Afghanistan do not foreordain that Tajikistan must become a puppet or even an integral part of the other two. The competing political groups in Tajikistan would prefer to diversify their foreign relations. That is feasible, as long as other countries do not mishandle their dealings with or simply ignore Tajikistan.
Tajikistan's Relations with Iran and Afghanistan
by Muriel Atkin

Tajikistan and Iran have shown increased interest in each other since the last years of the Soviet Union's existence. However, that does not mean that the reasons for this interest are the same in both countries or that either sees the other as the linchpin of its foreign policy. Culture, economics, religion, and politics all play a role in relations between these two countries. Tajikistan's interest in Iran has broad support but is tempered by wariness of subordination to Iran. Iranian interest in Tajikistan has a narrower base of support, being largely a function of government ambitions, but is broader ranging in its objectives.

Some of the same factors which link Tajikistan to Iran link it to Afghanistan as well. However, this relationship is complicated by the fact that one virtually has to speak of "Afghanistans" rather than a single entity, since the country is divided on many lines, including the political gulf between the supporters of the now-defunct Communist government in Kabul and the opposition to it, which is itself divided along ideological, religious, and ethnic lines. Ethnicity divides not only the mujahedins but also the population as a whole between the traditionally dominant Pashtuns and all others, who are divided among themselves and include Tajiks and other Persian-speakers.

The Tajiks of the former Soviet Union and the dominant nationality in Iran, the Persians, as well as the various Persian-speakers in Afghanistan, are similar—though not identical—in
language and other aspects of culture. That fact has been important to educated Tajiks in Central Asia as they maneuvered for advantage in the context of Soviet nationality relations and began the process of building a viable independent state in the post-Soviet period.

Although the term "Tajik" has a centuries-long tradition of use, not only in Central Asia, to differentiate Persian-speakers from Turkic peoples, the use of that name to designate a nationality in a political sense is a twentieth-century creation of the Soviet regime. The subdivision of Soviet Central Asia during the 1920s and 1930s into republics defined in terms of nationality gave ethnicity greater weight in the politics as well as the social, cultural, and economic concerns of the region than it had had in the past.

Elites of all the major Central Asian nationalities had to deal with the way the Soviets defined their national identity for them. This included categorizing all of them as "formerly backward peoples," who owed their progress not only to Communist rule but also to the guidance of the more advanced Russians. In addition, the Soviet way of defining nationalities in Central Asia could be more inclusive in some cases than what had existed traditionally, as in the subsuming of tribal, local, or even ethnic identities into larger national categories, but divisive in others, emphasizing the separateness of officially-defined nationalities from kindred peoples inside or outside the Soviet Union. At the same time that Central Asian nationalities had to deal with the
Kremlin's policy toward them, they also competed among themselves on many points, including political power, access to natural resources, and educational opportunities. This competition has persisted and in many ways intensified in the post-Soviet era. In coping with nationality relations on both all-Union and regional levels, educated Tajiks have made significant political use of their kinship to other Persian-speakers since the 1940s.

One of the most important ways many educated Tajiks in general as well as Tajikistan's Communist officials have sought to counter denigrating interpretations of their identity by either the central authorities or their Turkic neighbors has been to stress their links to the Persian past and present. As a practical matter, before the political reforms of the closing years of the Soviet era, they often had to label as Tajik anything Persian from beyond Central Asia to avoid provoking Moscow's wrath. Less important than the accuracy of this designation is the way in which it has enabled Tajiks to evade, at least to some extent, Moscow's efforts to regulate the content of their culture. The crux of this interpretation is that Tajik-Persian culture is not "formerly


backward" or a mere addendum to the Turkic character of Central Asia but is highly developed and ancient in origin. In 1989, Tajikistan openly recognized the importance of Persian culture to its own when it enacted a law making Tajik the state language; the wording of the law equated Tajik and Persian. Non-Communist Tajik organizations have taken the same view of the kinship between the two. By Tajikistan's first year of independence, it has become commonplace to refer to Persian and Tajik simultaneously, as one language, and often to use only the name "Persian" where "Tajik" would have been used in the past.

During the late Soviet and early post-Soviet periods, in Tajikistan as in many republics, nationalism has gained strength while simultaneously people see a need to develop new foreign contacts to supplement or replace the old center-periphery relationship with Moscow. Thus, it is logical for Tajikistanis to pay particular attention to Iran since they see a variety of ways in which Iran might be useful to them.

Much of the interest is cultural. Tajik nationalists perceived their people as having been deprived of much of their heritage, linguistic and otherwise, by the Soviet decision in 1929 to abandon the modified Arabic alphabet in which Persian is written. The result has been, as Moscow intended and contemporary Tajik nationalists regret, to impede communication between Tajiks

---


4 "Pora obnovleniia": "Na ruinakh ambitsii," "Izhoroti": "Ustav."
and fellow-Persian speakers outside the Soviet Union. The only Persian-language writings to which Tajiks have subsequently had access are the few that the Soviets chose to publish in the new alphabet (briefly Latin, subsequently modified Cyrillic.) This has been blamed for what is said to be the decline in the state of the Tajik language and culture. The solution proposed to end this artificial isolation/a return to the use of the Arabic alphabet, as called for by the 1989 language law and endorsed by non-Communist nationalists. Iran has tried to play a major role in this change by providing teachers, printing materials, and publications.

The ultimate effects of the new language policy remain to be seen but it will not necessarily provide the solution its proponents seek. Whatever the wisdom of the 1929 alphabet change, it occurred at a time when a majority of Tajik-speakers were illiterate; the current attempt to revive the use of the Arabic alphabet is directed at a population that is almost entirely literate—in the Cyrillic alphabet. Three years after the enactment of the new language law, a proponent of the use of the Arabic alphabet has estimated that only one per cent of Tajikistan's population is...

---


6 "Qonuni zaboni"; "Pora obnovleniia"; "Na ruinakh ambitsii"; "Izhoroti"; "Ustav."
literate in it. The vast majority of Tajik-language publications is still in the Cyrillic alphabet. In the current alphabet reform efforts, Tajiks are trying to avoid exclusive dependence on Iran. For example, Tajikistan has sought Arabic-alphabet printing materials from Pakistan.

Moreover, the change of alphabet and reliance on aid from Iran in accomplishing it poses particular problems for Tajik speakers. Vocabulary change has become a point of controversy as a consequence of the increased emulation of Iranian usage. Tajik nationalists look forward to dropping Russian loanwords and replacing them with words drawn from Persian-speakers in Iran and Afghanistan. However, the choice of replacements is not clear cut. Some of the vocabulary differences between Tajik and the Persian spoken elsewhere are not the consequence of borrowings from Russian but the survival of older Persian terminology and the incorporation of words from eastern Iranian or other regional languages. It remains to be seen whether Tajiks will be willing to discard these under the influence of Iranian Persian. There was some controversy over this initially.

In addition to Iranian-Tajikistani relations in language

---

7 Assadulloev, "Zarurati alifboi niyogon."


matters, the two countries have been cooperating in various other cultural spheres since 1989. For example, the Tajikistan Cultural Foundation made agreements in 1990 with several Iranian publishers to sell books and magazines in Tajikistan, including literary and political works, textbooks, and the Koran (with a Persian translation.) Such materials have indeed begun to reach Tajikistan. An Iranian film festival and a book fair were held in Dushanbe (Tajikistan's capital) late in 1990. Iranian officials visited Tajikistan in connection with both events. Subsequently, there have been additional visits in both directions by cultural figures and athletes as well as exhibits. A few Tajikistanis have been sent to Iran for specialized education and there are plans to send more. Iranian programs are broadcast on Tajikistan's state television network.

Although Iran's religious ideology is reflected in its

---


publications, not all of those sent to Tajikistan are primarily about Islam. For example, two of the magazines sent to an August 1992 press exhibit in Dushanbe were *Symbols and Meaning in Cinema* ([Nishanehha va ma’na dar sinema] and *Photographers and Photography* ['Akasan va 'akasi]). Iran has launched a monthly magazine, *Oshno* [acquaintance], aimed at Persian-speakers in Central Asia. The first issue opened with a discussion of how much Iran has in common with the republics of Central Asia, including language, literature, the arts, and history, as well as religion. That issue and the next contained articles on ancient (and therefore pre-Islamic) and medieval Persian and Arabic literature and on the writings of 'Ali Shariati (1933-1977), whose views were echoed in the ideology of Iran's Mojahedin-e Khalq, which was defeated in a violent power struggle with the Islamic Republican Party in the early 1980s.

Relations between Tajikistan and Iran involve economic matters in addition to cultural ones. The two countries have discussed joint ventures, particularly in spinning and weaving cotton, Tajikistan's main crop. This is especially significant for Tajikistan because, under the Soviet system, almost all of its cotton output was turned into finished goods by other republics of the former Union.


With the passage of time and Tajikistan’s emergence as an independent state, Iran has shown a willingness to increase the scale of its economic involvement in Tajikistan. It has offered the Dushanbe government $50 million in credits to buy Iranian-made equipment for use in light industry. Officials of the two countries have also signed agreements on banking and commercial cooperation. 16

As Tajikistan grapples with economic reform, at least a few nationalists look to Iran as an alternative economic model, on the grounds that it offered a relevant example of a country which had formerly been dependent economically but had achieved self-reliance and prosperity. 17 However, other Tajikistanis seek economic relations with a broader range of countries, including Pakistan, Turkey, Saudia Arabia, the United States, Germany, and China, as well as former Soviet republics. 18

The governments in both Dushanbe and Tehran have encouraged increased political-diplomatic contacts. The turning point came in June 1990, when Tajikistan’s vice-chairman of the Council of

Ministers, Otakhon Latifi, headed a delegation from his country to the Tehran observances of the first anniversary of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's death. Two years later, Tajikistan participated more emphatically in similar observances by sending a delegation of 150 to Tehran. The occasion was not only ceremonial but was also used for negotiations with Iranian officials on the expansion of relations between the two countries. Iran signaled its desire to capitalize on the opportunity by paying the travel expenses of the entire delegation.\textsuperscript{19}

An exchange at a still higher level was planned to start on August 25, 1991, when Qahhor Mahkamov, simultaneously head of the republic's government and first secretary of its Communist Party, was scheduled to visit Iran. That trip was canceled because of the attempted overthrow of Gorbachev a few days earlier and Mahkamov's subsequent fall from power. Undeterred by the missed opportunity, Iran's foreign minister stopped briefly in Dushanbe in December 1991, as part of his visit to several Soviet republics. He met with Tajikistan's new president, Rahmon Nabiev, a member of the Communist old guard, as well as various other officials.\textsuperscript{20} The presidential visit to Iran finally occurred in mid-1992 (June 28-30). At that time, the two countries concluded agreements on cooperation in the spheres of economics, culture, and scholarship; they also planned to establish a governmental commission to promote


further cooperation. An important part of the lesson Nabiev wanted Tajiks to draw from the visit, as he explained after his return, was how much they and the Iranians have in common. "We and the Iranians," he said, "have a single language, a single faith, we have a single science and culture. Moreover, right up to the 15th century we and they lived in a single state." 21

Despite the enthusiasm for the Iranian connection, Tajikistan has maintained its practice of trying to maximize its options. Thus, the Nabiev delegation proceeded directly from Iran to Pakistan and there concluded similar agreements.

After the demise of the Soviet Union, Iran became the first country to establish an embassy in Dushanbe, on January 9, 1992. On that occasion, the two countries declared their intention to establish airplane links between Dushanbe and Tehran, Mashhad, and Tabriz. 22 In recognition of Iran's timeliness in opening its embassy, the street in Dushanbe on which it is located, formerly named for Maxim Gor'kii, was renamed Tehran Street. (In a sense, the new name has comparatively neutral connotations, associated with Iran in a generic sense rather than the Islamic Republic in particular. In contrast, the street on which the Soviet embassy in Tehran was located was long known as Stalin Street.) Remarks by members of the Iranian delegation sent to Tajikistan for the occasion reflected some of the Tehran regime's thoughts on the


significance of relations between the two countries. Among the points highlighted by the Iranians were economic benefits and cultural cooperation. The latter included joint research projects on what an official described as their shared language, literature, and history as well as Iran's provision of teaching materials to Tajikistan for instruction in the Arabic alphabet. A member of the Iranian delegation also stated that his country planned to open a bookstore, to be called al-Huda (the path to salvation), to sell Iranian works on literature, history, and culture.23

The second country to establish an embassy in Dushanbe was the United States. Although many countries recognized Tajikistan's independence soon after the break up of the Soviet Union, few sent their own diplomatic representatives to Dushanbe in the first year of its independence.

For all Tajikistan's attention to developing its relations with Iran, neither its government nor its intelligentsia want the republic simply to fall into Iran's orbit. It is one thing for Tajiks to try to use contacts with Iran to strengthen their own position and quite another for them, at a time when nationalism is strong, to accept subordination to anyone else.

One of the ways educated Tajiks deal with this is by treating their heritage as deriving not only from the western Iranian Persians but also from the eastern Iranians indigenous to Central Asia. Initially, this owed much to the Kremlin's objective of

maximizing the differences between peoples living within the Soviet Union and without. However, Tajik nationalists have taken up the point for their own reasons. This gives them another type of Iranian heritage in which to take pride, especially in its Soghdian form. 24 (The Soghdians of ancient Central Asia were active in commerce along the silk route and had a highly developed culture.) When a group of reformist Tajik intellectuals in Moscow began publishing a newspaper in 1990, they called it "Sogdiana." Tajik nationalists' use of the eastern Iranian heritage serves three political aims: to counter the Soviet line about their former backwardness; refute the arguments of some of their Turkic neighbors that the Turkic peoples are the original Central Asians while the Tajiks arrived only after the Arab conquest; and counter the tendency of many Persian-speakers in Iran to regard Tajiks (to the extent that they notice them at all) as mere provincials on the periphery of the Perso-Iranian world. This attention to the Tajiks' eastern Iranian links extend to recent gestures by the government in Dushanbe to allow speakers of eastern Iranian languages living in contemporary Tajikistan greater latitude to use their own languages. 25 (For decades these peoples were allowed access to education and the mass media only in Russian or Tajik.)

---


The Tajiks' concern not to be relegated to the margins also appears in the way they look at the Persian component of their heritage. The accepted Tajik view of the revival of Persian as a literary language after the disruption caused by the Arab conquest is that it took place not in what inhabitants of the contemporary Iranian state think of as the Persian heartland—the Iranian plateau—but was focused in Central Asia and adjoining parts of Iran and Afghanistan; only after this revival was well underway did literary Persian spread southwest across the Iranian plateau.26

Some of the ways Tajiks now look at their Persian heritage does not coincide with the views of the more militant Islamicizers in Iran. One aspect of this is the interest in pre-Islamic Persian civilization. For example, Tajik nationalists praise the Zoroastrian religion as a Tajik contribution to world civilization and praise Zoroastrian texts for a variety of reasons, including as an embodiment of Tajik civilization and an ethical guide.27 The Tajiks' attention to their Persian heritage certainly includes ample discussion of cultural figures who lived in Islamic times but not all of them represent views of which the Tehran government would approve. Among these figures was Ahmad Kasravi, a historian noted for his criticism of religion in general and Shi'ism in particular, who was assassinated by a Shi'ite militant in 1946.


A particularly striking example of this Tajik enthusiasm for dissident Persian voices is the attention paid to Nasir-i Khusrow (1004 – c. 1072), a Persian-speaker from Central Asia who was both an accomplished writer and a major propagandist for Isma'ili Islam, which is quite different from the Imami Shi’ism which predominates in the Islamic Republic of Iran. In addition to the increased public discussion of his intellectual contributions, the pedagogical institute in the city of Qurghonteppa was renamed in his honor in 1992.  

Even though the majority of Tajikistan's population is Muslim and aware of its Iranian heritage, that does not guarantee that they will emulate the Islamic politics of Iran. In addition to the fact that the Tajiks distinguish between Persian cultural pride and Iranian hegemony, the Tajiks' de facto reclamation of Persian culture and history began roughly half a century ago, long before politically militant Islam came to power in Iran. There is no reliable evidence about the views of the vast majority of ordinary inhabitants of Tajikistan about Islamic politics, whether along Iranian, Afghanistani, Saudi, Pakistani, or other lines. In the absence of truly free elections or reliable public opinion surveys, or even a successful coup with broad-based support, there can be only speculation based on select anecdotes and rumors. Many Tajiks, Uzbeks, and other indigenous inhabitants of the republic

---

consider Islam valuable in a cultural or religious sense or both. However, the tendency of some Western observers to equate being a Muslim with being an Islamic "fundamentalist" demonstrates only the observers' confusion. Similarly, the stories in the Soviet and post-Soviet media about Islamic conspiracies to establish an Islamic state are, by themselves, proof mainly of the fears and propaganda methods of the authors of those stories.

Some Tajiks think that the fact that Iran's Islamic regime was Shi'i while most Tajiks are Sunni minimizes their susceptibility to Iranian religious influence. At least some Tajiks admire Iran in a general sense, as a country where Islam is practiced freely (in contrast to conditions in Tajikistan until quite recently) without wanting to emulate the specific Islamicizing politics of the Iranian government. One vocal Tajik nationalist who is also something of an Islamicizer has used an Iranian precedent to legitimate the form of government he advocates for a post-Communist Tajikistan but draws his example from pre-revolutionary Iran. He wants the country to be governed by an executive and a majlis (legislature) but with a president rather than a shah filling the role of the executive.²⁹ Tajikistan's most powerful religious figure, Qadi Akbar Turajonzoda, has stated repeatedly that most inhabitants of the republic do not want to emulate Iran's Islamic republic. For example, in an interview with a German newspaper, he contended that Iran could not possibly be a paradigm for Tajik-

The conditions are completely different. In Iran there was never a Communist Party in power. The 70-year predominance of atheism has had an effect on our country . . . Today the people are afraid of an Islamic regime, and why should one make the people afraid? . . . The people understand religion in their way: They do not want the women to wear the chador [veil] again and to sit at the hearth, they reject polygamy, and they are afraid that human rights will be restricted if Islam comes to power. This at least is what they have been taught. Psychologically, they are not ready to support an Islamic state.  

He has made this point not only for foreign consumption but also to a domestic audience of critics of the Nabiev regime, as in his remarks to demonstrators in Dushanbe during the spring 1992 political crisis there.  

Similarly, one the the leaders of Tajikistan's Islamic Revival Party has asserted that the republic would find its own gradual
path to an Islamic state rather than follow the Iranian example. Although the concern of the United States about the destabilizing potential of Islamic "fundamentalism" is known in Tajikistan, one of the founders of the Islamic Rebirth Party there, Davlat Usmon, deputy prime minister in the republic's coalition government, has publicly expressed good wishes toward the United States and advocated the growth of mutually beneficial relations between the two countries.

While Islamicizers in Tajikistan have often talked moderation, then-President Rahmon Nabiev, who had no intention of letting an Islamic state supplant Communist rule, played on religious links to Iran for reasons of his own. In the face of growing opposition to him among his predominantly Muslim fellow countrymen, Nabiev tried to associate himself with Iran's Islamic republic. For example, he sought to impress Tajikistanis with the fact that Iran was the first foreign country he visited as president, that he was received by high-ranking Iranian officials, that he visited the "blessed grave of Imam Khomeini," and that he recognized the existence of an Islamic bond between the two countries. On May 10, 1992, when demonstrators in Dushanbe seemed on the verge of toppling his government, Nabiev was the first of the republic's political


figures to call Iran's President Rafsanjani to ask for help. In contrast, when officials in Iran look toward Central Asia, including Tajikistan, they see a region which they think should not only be oriented toward Iran but also to defer to its leadership. This is not an issue of particular concern to large sections of the Iranian public but is the policy of the political leadership. Such an approach reflects both ideological ambitions and the more conventional diplomatic and economic interests of the Iranian state. On one level, the Islamic Republic of Iran has broadcast its message by radio to Central Asia since the early years of the republic's existence. On another level, the Tehran regime has also increased its efforts to develop relations through state-to-state channels since the late 1980s.

Underlying Tehran's activity in this area is the presumption of a right to lead expressed in both religious and cultural terms. The foremost example of the religious justification found expression in Khomeini's letter (January 1, 1989) to Gorbachev. Khomeini praised Gorbachev for making reforms and urged him to carry the process much further. The Ayatollah's fundamental message was that Islam held the solution to the Soviet Union's problems. Now that the bankruptcy of Marxism had been demonstrated, he argued, Gorbachev ought not turn to the West for answers for it could provide none. Instead, he ought to learn about Islam because its "sublime and world encompassing values . . . can be a means for the

---

well-being and salvation of all nations." 36 Khomeini counseled the
Soviet Union to look to Iran for guidance because Iran, "as the
greatest and most powerful base of the Islamic world, can easily
help fill-up [sic] the ideological vacuum of your system." 37 As
regards those citizens of the Soviet Union who are already Muslims,
Khomeini praised Gorbachev for allowing them religious freedom and
depicted Iran as the fitting advocate of their interests, for "We
regard the Muslims of the world as the Muslims of our own country,
and we always regard ourselves as partners in their fate." 38 Thus,
Khomeini's message was not only the primacy of Islamic values in
worldly affairs but also Iran's role as the arbiter of what Islam
is and as the leader of Muslims everywhere. Obviously, this view
of Iran's importance is not shared by all Muslims in all countries,
including those of the former Soviet Union.

The Iranian leadership has continued to voice similar opinions
since Khomeini's death in June 1989. For example, President 'Ali
Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, when meeting with the Tajikistani
delegation to the June 1990 memorial for Khomeini, highlighted
Iran's interest in dealings with Tajikistan and other Soviet
republics with Muslim populations. 39 He spoke again of the
importance of the Islamic link between such former Soviet republics

36 Tehran domestic radio in Persian, January 8, 1989, FBIS,
37 Ibid., p. 59.
38 Ibid.
39 "Eron--Ittihodi Shuravi--Tojikiston," Adabiyot va san"at,
and Iran in February 1992, when representatives of the five Central Asian republics and Azerbaijan met in Tehran with officials from Iran, Turkey, and Pakistan to discuss economic cooperation. Rafsanjani and Iran's foreign minister, 'Ali Akbar Velayati, have also emphasized the cultural similarities between Iran and the republics to the north as grounds for closer relations.

Iran has openly involved itself in Tajikistan's religious affairs. For example, it funds mosque construction there and supported Tajikistanis traveling via Iran to Saudi Arabia to make the hajj in 1992. Its perennial rival, Saudi Arabia, has provided similar aid. Iran's ambassador in Dushanbe, 'Ali Ashraf Mujtahidi Shabistari, has declared that the Tajiks' Iranian culture was only perfected under the influence of Islam and that Tajiks and Iranians are linked by the "single title of Muslim Iranian," having the "same race, same culture, same history, same language, and same religion." The foreword to the first issue of a magazine Iran recently began publishing for Tajiks in formerly Soviet Central Asia ranked Islam prominently among the things Iran had in common.

---

42 "Yordami Eron," Adabiyot va san'at, June 4, 1992, p. 3; M. Olimi, "Oghozi id az namozgoh," ibid., p. 12; "Tojikiston ba qadom sohil mebaroyad?".
For all Iran's use of religious rhetoric, much of its interest in Tajikistan and other republics to the north concerns worldly matters such as diplomacy and trade. For example, Iran's objectives at the February 1992 meeting in Tehran were to obtain the support from other Muslim countries, including the former Soviet republics, for Iran's stance on various diplomatic issues and to promote economic relations with the Central Asian republics, with an eye to direct competition with Saudi Arabia's activities there. Even when Iranian officials discuss their special interest in the Muslim republics of the former Soviet Union, what they see in them is not only co-religionists but also factories, cheap labor, and railway lines.

Despite Iran's cultural and economic undertakings in Tajikistan and the speed with which it established an embassy there, much of Tehran's attention north of the border is directed to other republics. In recent years, Iran has sought a modus vivendi with the government in Moscow, whether that of the Soviet Union or the Russian Republic. Iranian concerns are related to such issues as the pursuit of diplomatic support for Iran's foreign policy objectives, especially as regards Iraq and Afghanistan, economic cooperation, and the purchase of military hardware. Tehran has

---

44 Shakuri, "Payomi oshnoyon."

45 "Muslim Regional Group."

also concluded agreements with some of the successor republics that are not predominantly Muslim. For example, it has made agreements with Ukraine and Moldova for the sale of oil and natural gas. Moscow has showed a similar interest in relations with Tehran.

Tajikistan is not Iran's highest priority among the southern-tier republics. Azerbaijan is particularly important to Tehran. Turkmenistan, with its long common border with Iran, is also a special object of Tehran's attentions, especially with regard to cross-border trade and the use of Turkmenistan's port facilities by Iran's Caspian merchant shipping. One ambitious and costly Central Asian undertaking about which Iran is enthusiastic is the construction of rail links among existing Chinese, Russian, Central Asian, and Iranian lines in the hope of establishing a lucrative commercial route across Iran to world markets. Turkmenistan and Qazaqistan are crucial to the development of this route; Tajikistan


is peripheral to it. (Furthermore, the feasibility of the entire project is questionable since Iran's railroads themselves are not built sturdily enough to withstand a heavy volume of cargo.)

The terms in which Iran sees itself as being the natural leader for largely Muslim republics north of the border could limit those republics' willingness to follow Iran. The Tehran view is Iranocentric and risk alienating those who are supposed to heed its appeal. For example, the international coalition of Muslim states which Iran tried to persuade the Central Asian republics and Azerbaijan to join at the February 1992 meeting in Tehran was predicated on Tehran's assumption that Iran's interests in international affairs were identical to all Muslims' interests. Similarly, Foreign Minister Velayati said, regarding the nationalist upsurge in the Central Asian republics in general, that "illustrious figures of the history of Islam, Iran, and civilization are the symbols of the revival of the national identity of these republics." To describe the situation in those particular terms sends a message that Iran, as the self-designated spokesman for Islam and embodiment of Iranian culture, ought to define the content of other people's nationalist movements.

---


50 The author is indebted to Dr. Patrick Clawson for this information.

51 "Muslim Regional Group."

This is not an isolated slip of the tongue but part of a habitual attitude toward Central Asia. The same assumption has been manifest on other occasions. For example, when Iran's ambassador to Tajikistan said that forty to sixty per cent of the vocabulary of the Turkic languages of Central Asia was Persian he revealed an impolitic indifference to the strength of national pride among various Turkic peoples of the region. The issue is not what is accurate philologically. After years of being told how much the Turkic peoples of Central Asia were beholden to one outside power, they are not now eager to be instructed in their debt to another.

Soviet Tajiks' attitudes toward Afghanistan are similar in many ways to their attitudes toward Iran but are complicated by the war the Soviet army fought in support of the Communist regime in Kabul. During the war years, the proximity of and the cultural similarities between Tajikistan and Afghanistan made the former useful to Moscow as it strove to solidify Communist rule in the latter. Moscow sent Soviet Tajiks (and other Central Asian peoples) to work in Afghanistan's government, educational, and scholarly systems. It sent publications from Tajikistan to Afghanistan. It used Tajikistan as an example of the benefits of Communist rule to show delegations from Afghanistan and as a place to educate young Afghanistanis. Cultural exchanges between these two republics continued throughout the war years. Tajiks from Tajikistan served in the Soviet military in Afghanistan from the

---

53 Shabistari, "Payomi safirii Jumhurii Islomii Eron."
This last point is an extremely sensitive one for some Tajiks. In the period following the August 1991 coup attempt in Moscow, when various people in Tajikistan expressed their opinions more openly in public than before, a few Tajiks criticized Tajik participation in the Soviet war effort for the ethnic, not religious, reason that for their people the war amounted to fratricide. Political conditions have not yet changed enough in Tajikistan to permit a full and free public discussion of this issue or a reliable sampling of public opinion on the subject.

Tajik nationalists also see Afghanistan as important to them culturally, for much the same reason as they do Iran: as a source of examples of good usage of literary Persian to counterbalance the harmful effects of Soviet language policy and as a source of literature in the Persian language.

Since the Soviet military withdrawal from Afghanistan, Tajikistan has maintained direct and indirect dealings with Afghanistan’s Communist and post-Communist governments on cooperation in various spheres. In consequence of the increasing

---


decentralization of Soviet power in the Gorbachev era and concomitant rise in the importance of the republican governments, the Communist government in Kabul opened a consulate in Dushanbe. Tajikistani officials signed economic agreements with representatives of that government and a private Afghanistani company for such things as trade, development projects, and joint ventures. 

Exchanges of students and publications as well as increased scholarly contacts were also planned before the fall of the Najibullah regime in Kabul. Representatives of one of Afghanistan’s northern border provinces offered to allow Tajikistanis to study in madrasahs there. For years, small numbers of Soviet Muslim religious figures were sent abroad to study, with Moscow’s approval. Opportunities for foreign study became particularly important at the end of the Soviet era because the substantial increase in religious freedom in Central Asia brought with it an increased demand for Islamic instruction, which could not be satisfied in full by the madrasahs in the region.

The extent and nature of Afghanistan’s disruptive influence on Tajikistan, in the form of Islamic "fundamentalist" propaganda, arms smuggling, and ethnic ties, are controversial subjects on which there is more propaganda than reliable information. Various Soviet sources, including V.V. Petkel, head of the KGB in


Tajikistan from 1985 until 1991, have depicted Islam in wholly negative terms and linked it to anti-Soviet subversion from abroad, especially via Afghanistan. Such assertions owe so much to the ideological biases and self-interest of those who make them that it is difficult to discern what their basis is in fact.

The KGB and other elements of the old Soviet order have been accustomed to deny that there could be any legitimate domestic causes of discontent and to shift the blame to foreign subversion. Some hard-liners have even resorted to the much-used Soviet propaganda line which exploited the trauma of World War II in order to warn against an external threat to newly independent Tajikistan. Another recent example of this hoary tradition of stirring up fears of an external threat could be found in a place where Afghanistan and Islamic "fundamentalism" cannot possibly be at issue--Belarus. The head of the KGB there told the press that hundreds of agents of the CIA, various European countries, and former Soviet republics have infiltrated Belarus and are trying to recruit its inhabitants by offering them hard currency. Even the border guards in Tajikistan have branded as false a Pravda report of a foray into Tajikistan by Afghanistani mujahidin. In fact,


60 A. Sekretov, "A pamiat' sviashchenna..." Narodnaia gazeta, Marcy 27, 1992, p. 2.


according to Tajikistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, during the
Najibullah era in Afghanistan (1986-1992), government forces
occasionally dropped bombs on Tajikistani soil when fighting the
mujahidin but Tajikistan's government portrayed the incidents as
mujahidin attacks.\textsuperscript{53}

Claims by some Afghanistani mujahidin to have supporters in
Soviet Central Asia cannot be confirmed independently. Although
the battle by Afghanistani mujahidin against the Soviet invaders
and the Communist regime in Kabul has won admiration from people in
Tajikistan and elsewhere in Central Asia, that does not by itself
prove that Tajiks feel a particular loyalty to or draw their ideas
from any mujahidin group. The assumption that mujahidin influence
play a crucial role implies that Tajiks have no perception of their
own interests and grievances but are merely passive objects to be
manipulated by others.

Furthermore, the mujahidin, while agreeing that Islam is a
part of their way of life, disagree among themselves on what kind
of Islamic country Afghanistan ought to be. There is a big
difference between a state which is Islamic, in the sense that
Islam is practiced freely in accordance with local traditions, and
an "Islamic state" which seeks a radical transformation of society
to purge it of the injustices, deviations from proper Islamic
practice, and non-Islamic influences—all as defined differently by
different groups of Islamicizers. Afghanistan's mujahidin organi-

\textsuperscript{53} J. Steele, "The Tajiks next door watch Massoud's Kabul," The
organizations are divided along these and other lines; several of the
ingroups are also associated predominantly with a particular
ethnic group. Thus, one of the groups that is more radical in its
approach to Islam, the Hizb-i Islami, is largely Pashtun and was at
odds with the Jami'at-i Islami, which sees Islamicization differ-
ently and is predominantly Tajik. These two groups fought each
other while also fighting Communist rule in their land and have
continued that fight since the accession of a mujahidin coalition
government. Afghanistan's Tajik population lives primarily in the
northeast, across the border from the republic of Tajikistan, while
the Pashtuns live predominantly in southern and southeastern
Afghanistan (and across the border in Pakistan.)

During 1992, when the political power struggle in Tajikistan
escalated into civil war, the Najibullah regime in Kabul fell, and
the groups arrayed against it fought among themselves for power,
rumors increased of Afghanistani involvement in Tajikistan's
upheaval. When word reached Tajikistan of the fall of Afghan-
istan's Communist government in April 1992, demonstrators in
Dushanbe who opposed the Communist government at home welcomed this
news and found it encouraging in a general sense. However,
opposition spokesmen have expressly denied that there was any

---

64 O. Roy, "The Mujahidin and the Future of Afghanistan," in The
Shahrani, "Introduction: Marxist 'Revolution' and Islamic Resis-
tance in Afghanistan," in Revolutions and Rebellions in Afghan-
istan, Research Series no. 57, M.N. Shahrani and R.L. Canfield, eds.
(Berkeley, Institute Of International Studies, University of
California, 1984), pp. 45-49.
specific linkage between the developments in Afghanistan and the anti-government demonstrations underway in Dushanbe in April and May 1992. 

One particularly common rumor about connections between the Tajikistani opposition and the Afghanistani mujahidin is that the Hizb-i Islami, the most worrisome of the Afghanistani groups, with its radical Islamicizing policies and its readiness to use violence against fellow Afghanistanis, whether civilians or members of rival organizations, is the principal meddler in Tajikistan’s affairs. The Hizb is alleged to be arming Islamic militants in Tajikistan, especially members of the Islamic Rebirth Party. This is the version of events that the Nabiev regime certainly wanted people to believe. The allegation is part of the propaganda Nabiev and his supporters have used for months in the face of mounting opposition. The message is that they offer the only alternative to rule by Islamic extremists; that line also tries to obscure the extent to which Nabiev’s own heavy-handed rule has intensified the opposition to him.

The emphasis on the Hizbi-i Islami’s role has been denied by the head of Tajikistan’s legislature (and subsequently acting president), Akbarshoh Iskandarov, one of the younger generation of Communist politicians who is more adaptable to changing conditions.

---


and willing to cooperate with opposition groups. The presence in Tajikistan of Afghanistani mujahidin of any party has also been denied by Lieutenant-Colonel A. Jalilov of the border guards.\textsuperscript{17}

There is one way in which the Tajikistani opposition undeniably has looked to Afghanistan for help, for they have done so openly. However, this involves no cross-border subversion. In May 1992, as the confrontation between pro- and anti-Nabiev forces in Dushanbe threatened to turn into a bloodbath, spokesmen for two opposition parties held a press conference to call for outside assistance to halt the violence. They asked for such help not only from Afghanistan but also from Iran and the United Nations. The parties involved were the Islamic Rebirth Party and the Democratic Party of Tajikistan, which advocates full religious freedom for Muslims and others but does not endorse the creation of an Islamic state.\textsuperscript{58}

If the Hizb-i Islami has indeed been an active participant in the turmoil in Tajikistan, that would undercut the assumption in some quarters that ethnicity is the main basis for cross-border contacts, given the enmity between the Pushtun-led Hizb-i Islami and the Tajik-led Jami'at-i Islami. The Nabiev camp, in its efforts to magnify the specter of an external threat, has argued that the Jami'at is emulating the Hizb's involvement in the activities Tajikistan's opposition despite the continuing battles.


\textsuperscript{58} Shihab, "Asie centrale."
between the two groups because the issue is one of aiding fellow Muslims in their struggle against Communists.69 A New York Times reporter filed a story that "several hundred Afghan Tajiks [were] slipping across the border to fight for the opposition" in the weeks before Nabiév was forced to resign but did not identify the source or reliability of this information.70

A different kind of speculation about the political implications of the presence of Tajiks on both sides of the border focuses on whether a new state might be created to unite them. At the time of the May 1992 crisis in Dushanbe, that prospect was discounted by political figures there. The perception in Dushanbe was that Ahmad Shah Mas'ud, the guerrilla leader of the Jami'at-i Islami who became a hero during the war in Afghanistan and Minister of Defense in its first post-Communist government, is not interested because the power struggle within Afghanistan is a far higher priority.71 In the opinion of Tajikistan's, qadi, Akbar Turajonzoda, who is associated with the anti-Nabiév camp in the republic's politics, Mas'ud's reputation was not widespread in Tajikistan by the time the mujahidin coalition came to power in Afghanistan and few outside the intelligentsia realized that he was a fellow Tajik.72 (Reportedly he is better known in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, from which

69 "Sarvari mujohidon."


71 Shihab, "Fausse sortie au Tadjikistan," Le Monde, May 10-11, 1992, p. 3; Steele, "The Tajiks next door."

72 Steele, "The Tajiks next door."
his forebears moved to Afghanistan.) Turajonzoda does not see the creation of a new state uniting Tajikistan with Afghanistan and Iran as a necessary consequence of the cultural and religious kinship of the inhabitants of those lands.

According to an official Tajikistani source, there are Afghani residents who crossed into Tajikistan in the spring of 1992, or attempted to do so, not because they are mujahidin intent on fomenting revolt but because they were soldiers who had served the Communist regime in Kabul and, after its fall, sought safety for themselves and their families across the border. Similarly, unofficial anecdotes indicated that some people (the total number is unknown), presumably associated in some way with Afghanistan's Communist regime, crossed into Tajikistan to escape the upheaval at home but then went on to settle in Moscow.

Even if there is no elaborate conspiracy by elements in Afghanistan to topple the Nabiev regime, without a doubt the border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan is no longer well patrolled in 1992 and had been only slightly more controlled in the immediately preceding years. For the first five months of 1992, an official source put the known number of border violations above 250, roughly

---

73 The author is indebted to Dr. Boris Rumer for this information.

74 Wright, "Report," p. 75.

twice as many as in the first half of 1991.\footnote{G. Kleinman, "Snova tuchi khodiat khmuro," Narodnaia gazeta, May 28, 1992, p. 4.} Border guards units are severely undermanned, especially in positions that require some expertise; they are also undersupplied; and inhabitants of the Tajikistan side of the border are hostile to the guards' efforts. According to official estimates, the border guards were at 28 to 40 per cent of their intended strength by the summer of 1992.\footnote{Cabinet of Ministers, Tajikistan, "Obrashchenie," Narodnaia gazeta, July 4, 1992, p. 1; Kleinman, "Snova tuchi khodiat khmuro;" "Ruzhoi purtashvishi sarhad," Adabiyot va san'at, May 14, 1992, p. 3; TIA Khovar, "Za ukreplenie," p. 2.}

However, not all of the border violations are political; smuggling and raiding for plunder have also increased. The significance of these economically motivated border crossings was reflected in the fact that Tajikistan's Cabinet of Ministers listed smuggling first among the kinds of border violations in its declaration on the troubles in that zone. The Cabinet also promised to try to ease the problem by increasing the means for people who live along the border to conduct legal cross-border trade.\footnote{Ibid.} The contraband travels in both directions and includes, according to Colonel P. I. Kuniakov of the border guards, watches, athletic shoes, drugs, gold dust, firewood, currency, and stolen property.\footnote{Kleinman, "Snova tuchi khodiat khmuro."} Two incidents reported in the Soviet press in 1991
involved attempted cattle rustling. Along the eastern part of the border, in the Badakhshan area, Tajikistan negotiated an agreement with local Afghanistani leaders in the summer of 1992 which provides, in part, for the latter to curb the smuggling of drugs and arms into Tajikistan; in return Tajikistan will, among other things, permit inhabitants of the area to enter Tajikistan for medical treatment.

Some of the border violators do indeed carry weapons. The border guards have identified a few of these people as Afghani- stanis. However, other reports, including from the border guards, indicate that many of those trying to bring weapons northward are Tajiks from Tajikistan who have gone to Afghanistan during one of the crisis periods during 1992 and then tried to return home. It is important to note that not all the weapons that have traveled this route are intended for opposition groups. Former President Nabiev's supporters in the southern province of Kulob are also alleged to have obtained arms from Afghanistan.

---


seemingly without interference from the border guards. At least some of the cross-border arms acquisitions are business transactions not based primarily on ideological or ethnic solidarity. For example, in October 1992, a group of people were alleged to have stolen a helicopter in southern Tajikistan for an arms-buying trip to Afghanistan; they brought carpets with them to trade for the weapons. Rumor has it that some of the weapons acquired by factions in Tajikistan's civil war come not from across the border but from regular army units stationed in the republic.

Not all dealings are acrimonious between Tajikistan under the fragile coalition government which took power after the May 1992 crisis, and Afghanistan under its uneasy coalition government which came to office in April 1992. In July 1992, the then-head of Tajikistan's legislature, Akbarshoh Iskandarov, made an official visit to Afghanistan's new president, Burhanuddin Rabbani, head of the Jami'at-i Islami. The two agreed to the establishment of diplomatic relations between their countries and Afghanistan undertook to combat the smuggling of drugs and weapons into Tajikistan.

Tajikistan is also interested in developing contacts with Persian-speakers abroad, in whatever country they live, not just in Afghanistan or Iran. One important means towards this end has been

---

to hold international conferences in Dushanbe that are aimed at such people. The first of these, in 1990, was devoted to one specific, cultural subject: the achievements of the pre-Islamic Persian poet-musician Barbad (sixth-seventh centuries A.D.) Participants came from various countries, including Iran and the United States. The message of this focus on Barbad was not solely the man's artistic achievements but also that this was a Tajik who had made this notable contribution to the world of Persian culture in general; the fact that the name "Tajik" and the distinction it implied did not yet exist in Barbad's time were not part of the message. 87

A second international conference (September 9-16, 1992) was scheduled for a more dramatic time than the planners intended, not only the first anniversary of Tajikistan's declaration of independence but also the political confrontation in Dushanbe that led to the resignation of President Nabiev. The focus of this gathering was not the achievements of an individual but the communities among Tajiks wherever they live. The largest contingent of invited participants was from Afghanistan (150), the next largest was from Iran (60); other Central Asian republics and Russia were also to be represented in strength (a total of 100 invited); smaller numbers were also invited from the United States, Saudi Arabia, and China. Some of the planned sessions dealt with cultural matters but, significantly, others dealt with economic

matters. Businessmen as well as scholars were among those invited.88

In 1992, Tajikistan faces a host of challenges, both domestic and external. Although many advocates of change in the republic wanted it to have much more autonomy within the former Soviet Union, few of the politically active people at any point on the political spectrum expected Tajikistan to become a separate state so soon. They hoped, over-optimistically, that Moscow would help them address a variety of needs, in economic, environmental, security, and other spheres. With the collapse of the Soviet state, Tajikistan had to look abroad to fill that void. Political and economic groups in Iran, Afghanistan, and many other countries have their own ambitions to play a role in Tajikistan. That does not guarantee that Tajikistanis would respond positively to all such efforts. The kinds of practical assistance, not rhetoric, offered them by foreign countries will surely affect their orientation. Given the growing polarization caused by the conflict between the public's dissatisfaction with the old order left over from the Soviet era and the Communist old guard's determination to preserve its power and privileges by any means, support may decline for political figures--of various ideologies--who advocate moderation and compromise and who therefore are eager to develop relations with the widest possible range of foreign countries. Tajikistan's social and economic problems are so

serious that whoever wins the power struggle will have to seek help from some outside. However, it is an oversimplification to assume that Tajikistan must necessarily fall into another country's orbit because of the cultural and religious similarities between them.