

**International Affairs Forum Interview:**

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By Jennifer Ashton



**Dr. Mehrdad Haghayeghi** (Missouri State University) discusses Iran's increasing influence over Central Asia.

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**International Affairs Forum:** The Islamic Republic of Iran has been gradually expanding its ties with the countries of Central Asia since the fall of the Soviet Union through economic and cultural contacts. Considering their close geographic and cultural similarities, why has Iran taken so long to build these ties?

**Dr. Haghayeghi:** First thing, Central Asia is not monolithic region. There are Turkic and Persian speaking cultures. Now having said that, one of the major obstacles to an accelerated expansion of ties between Iran and Central Asia has been Iran's revolutionary government. This government has espoused terrorism, has aided militant Islamic movements in the region. Therefore, the reputation was not there for countries like Uzbekistan and even Tajikistan until 1997 to open their doors and do things. The U.S. has had a role in it too. The U.S. has been lobbying very hard to keep these people away from Iran, as part of the grand design of containing Iran. A third issue has to do with what benefits what may come out of a relationship with Iran. From the perspective from the Central Asian

Republics, Iran does not have much to offer economically. This country has been really at war for eight years and in isolation for twenty-five years. It is not a technically advanced country. Its oil industry is in a decrepit state. So, those are some of the reasons. Add to all that, the friction between Iran and the rest of the Central Asian Republics around the Caspian...Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, of course, Russia comes into play. So, the reputation hasn't been there because of the regime identity for any type of expansion beyond what we have seen.

**IA-Forum:** The Central Asian states share the same religion with Iran though they mainly practice Sunni rather than Shiite Islam. Do you think Iran would try to export its Islamic Revolution to Central Asia?

Dr. Haghayeghi: Actually, I am working on this subject right now, writing a chapter for a book that I'm doing. There are two or three phases to the interaction between Iran and Central Asia. The first phase is from around 1989 when Khomeini dies until about 1987. I refer to it as "Islam First"

phase. This was the phase that Iran was adamant about supporting radical Muslims in Central Asia. It was done indirectly and sometimes directly. That was replaced by the so-called "Iran First" phase. This was from Khatami until 2005. That was when Khatami said, "we have got to get back into the fold of the international community, and we have to change the image of Iran..." And so there was a reduction in a kind of support, at least logistical and material support for Islamists in the region. So, Iran under Khatami tried to change that phase. Now, with the election of Ahmadinejad, who knows what's going to happen. He's a blast from the past. He's the one bringing who's bringing everything back to when Khomeini was alive. Khomeini's doctrine was you go help any Muslim activist who's willing to topple the governments of the region that are corrupt.

**IA-Forum:** Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad recently declared that Israel should be wiped off the map despite continued criticism and worry from the West regarding its nuclear weapons program. Should Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's comments be taken so seriously? Do you see Central Asian leaders adopting this brand of rhetoric?

**Dr. Haghayeghi:** Of course, it has to be taken seriously. This regime has provided all sorts of support for anti-Israeli groups and anti-Israeli action over the last twenty-five years. I think the most vivid example of that is the creation of Hezbollah in southern Lebanon. That is really an Iranian phenomenon created in 1983 or so by a confidant of the Ayatollah Khomeini. They were providing something like 100 million dollars a year, supporting, and equipping them. Just recently, there

was a hefty exchange of fire between Hezbollah and the Israeli forces. So, this regime does act on its thoughts. Now having said that, Iran cannot pose a direct threat to Israel. All it can do is just be on the fringes of the state, agitate it. I would be concerned about it, particularly in light of the fact that they are after developing nuclear weapons as much as they say it's for peaceful purposes. But I don't think that's where it ends. I think we are going to see a lot more of this rhetoric being flagged around, shown around. We have to be concerned about it.

**IA-Forum:** U N Secretary General Kofi Annan recently cancelled a trip to Iran citing the ongoing controversy over Ahmadinejad's comments as inappropriate timing. This move, along with international outrage on the part of world leaders is palpable. How do you think Central Asian leaders should confront Ahmadinejad's comments?

**Dr. Haghayeghi:** You have to remember one of the major axis of Iran's foreign policy, for that matter, part of Central Asia is the relationship, or lack thereof, with the U.S. The U.S. does have significant leverage. That leverage is dynamic, is changing. To give you one example, Uzbekistan severed its strategic ties with the U.S. in the summer of 2005 and has just recently signed a treaty of alliance with Russia. Now, Uzbekistan was always weary and suspicious of Iran because of its ties with the U.S. Now that tie is severed, and Uzbekistan is close to Russia, it is looking more favorably towards Iran. So the dynamic is ever changing. On the other hand, countries like Turkmenistan, neighboring Iran, feel in need to work with Iran because the only way they can really get their gas out into the international market is either through Russia which restricts their

choices and also price, or deal with Iran. So back to my first point, the region's relationship, the region's political economic makeup is not monolithic. These independent nations have different relationships with Iran.

**IA-Forum:** Do you see the U.S. presence in the region as a major barrier against further expansion of Iranian ties with the five Central Asian republics?

**Dr. Haghayeghi:** Yes, I think it is. There are limits to that, of course. There are limits as to what the U.S. can do. In my opinion, unless the U.S. is willing to deliver on its promises, that leverage is going to be weakened and weakened over time. The leverage against Iran, or the lobbying ability against Iran.

**IA-Forum:** Despite its own intentions, how can Iran play a positive political influence in the region?

**Dr. Haghayeghi:** That is an interesting question. They have over the years pretended that they are playing a positive role. At the surface, for instance, you see them play a significant role in bringing peace to Tajikistan after 5 years. You see several initiatives in Nagorno-Karabakh region in the Caucasus. Then, when you scratch the surface, you begin to see that there is a schizophrenia about Iranian foreign policy. Some call it that; some call it a dual track foreign policy. The supreme leadership dictates one track, which is radical, revolutionary, and militant in orientation. Then you have the track pursued by the Foreign Ministry and the government, which is more moderate, more diplomatic. The suspicion is going to be there with respect to Iran. Even in respect to Turkmenistan, there have been some

three or four dozen Iranian spies captured by the Turkmen government and incarcerated. The Turkmen send them back every couple of years as an amnesty and then shoves it under the cover. This Iran during Ahmadinejad should be looked upon with greater suspicion in terms of its motivation in the region.

**IA-Forum:** You previously mentioned an actual positive influence Iran had over Tajikistan. Is it true that Iran persuaded Tajikistan Islamists to sign a peace agreement that ended a civil war in that country in the 1997?

**Dr. Haghayeghi:** Yes, but if you really want to dig deeper, Iran was instrumental in causing that war, in terms of the support that they provided to the militant Muslims initially in 1992 and 1993 before they were forced into exile in Afghanistan. While they were in Afghanistan, part of the leadership was in Parshavard, Pakistan. Both small arms and cash were dispersed to these people. You see the same phenomenon in Islamic movements of Uzbekistan before U.S. forces decimated their army in Afghanistan. The Islamic movement of Uzbekistan has an office in Mashhad. They had two, three hour broadcasts into Uzbekistan in Uzbek inciting violence and militarism.

**IA-Forum:** How have relations between Iran and Central Asian nations changed in the midst of the post-9/11 war on terror?

**Dr. Haghayeghi:** The attacks and the American response] was a severe blow to their support for militant Islam. What happened was, as I said before, there was support for the Islamic movement in Uzbekistan as well as for the Xinjiang separatists. The money and logistics were provided through

Herat, which is really a protectorate of Iran in Afghanistan under Ismael Khan. That was a severe blow because that line of logistics and financial support was cut off because of the U.S. invasion. At the same time, I think it created a backlash because when President Bush called Iran part of the “axis of evil”, that in my opinion has been instrumental in making the regime be more conscious of its security. Pursuit of nuclear weapons, the election of an ultra-conservative Muslim such as Ahmadinejad, and a whole host of other stuff that has happened really should be seen as a reaction to the U.S. position with respect to the Iranian regime. Iran under these Ayatollahs has never had a national security doctrine. The line between national security and regime security had always been blurred because of the U.S. antagonism. They were from the outset always worried about being toppled. Since 9/11, that obsession with regime security has become even more pronounced. Whatever they are doing, really, is out of the paranoia, justified or otherwise, that the U.S. is after them to oust them.

**IA-Forum:** Are there specific countries in Central Asia that may benefit more from strengthened ties with Iran than others? If there are specific countries, which ones and why?

**Dr. Haghayeghi:** Well, there are two interesting things, Jennifer. When you look at Iran’s desire or their attempt to expand ties with these countries. Two or three criteria are used. One is

cultural. There is an affinity for Tajikistan because they are Persian-speaking. That cultural tie has been very strong in terms of defining the relationship between them and Iran. The second is the position of these countries with respect to the U.S. The closer they are to the U.S.; Iran will be less interested in expanding ties. Iran judges these countries on their perception of the U.S. This is really an emotional policy rather than a rational policy. The third issue has to do with what comes out of in material terms. Can Iran have meaningful economical ties that would benefit the two sides? You have really three tracks that define the extent of closeness and desirability of ties. One is cultural, one is the position in respect to the U.S., and one is economic. Those are the three significant markers of Iran’s relationship with the region.

**IA-Forum:** In regards to those three areas of influence, do you think Iran will play a major influence in Central Asia’s future twenty years from now?

**Dr. Haghayeghi:** Twenty years down the road maybe, we would want Iran to have closer ties because by then, hopefully the regime of Ayatollahs will be long gone. So, you really want to use Iran as a bridgehead to counteract the reassertion of Russia in the former Soviet space. Hopefully, I would have to say in the next ten years, the entire U.S.-Iranian dynamics would probably change which means a significant regional change