



Iran and Tajikistan: A Story of Love and Hate

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Muhiddin Kabiri, chairman of the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), labelled as a “terrorist” in his country since his party was officially banned in September 2015, ended the year visiting Iran and meeting the most influential Iranian political figure – Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei. Tehran’s move angered Dushanbe and was followed by an official protest, naming Iran a “supporter of terrorism”, as well as a sea of Soviet-style propagandist articles in official media aimed at vilifying Iran. At the same time, President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon paid an official visit to the main rival of Iran in the region, Saudi Arabia, and returned with unprecedented business contracts. This visit coincided with the [escalation of tensions in the Iranian-Saudi relationship](#). Is Iran going to bet again on the Islamic opposition in Tajik politics? Was it Iran’s answer to [recent pressures over Islam](#) in Tajikistan or to the visit of the Tajik president to Saudi Arabia? Or it is a simple strategy to avoid putting all their eggs in one basket as Russia does in Central Asia?

Tajikistan, the Missed ‘Little Iran’

Iran has a history of both winning hearts and losing them in Tajikistan. The height of this love was in the end of 1980s,

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when perestroika in the Soviet Union gave a chance for Tajiks to look for their historical and cultural shared roots with Iran. At that time, many among the Tajik intelligentsia were looking at Iran as a country with a great culture. They wanted to change the name of Tajikistan's national language from Tajik into Farsi, as well as the script from Cyrillic into Arabic, but they had no clue about the confessional difference between Sunni and Shia. At that time, Iran was already marginalized on the international scene and was still recovering from a decade of war with Iraq. However, it was quick to use its linguistic and historical proximity with Tajikistan to its advantage. Tehran recognized the independence of the country and was the very first to [open an embassy in Dushanbe](#) in January 1992. Tajik elites were generously invited to visit Iran as part of various exchange programs.

At the end of 1992, Tajikistan entered into a bloody civil war. Tehran gave refuge and support to the leaders of the Democratic-Islamic coalition of the Tajik opposition, and was therefore considered to be a pro-Islamic actor. However, it also contributed a critical role in helping peace discussions: Tehran hosted several rounds of the Tajik peace negotiations in 1994, 1995, and 1997, bringing both sides to the discussion table. President Rahmon paid an official visit to Tehran in 1995 and opened an embassy there. But seen from Dushanbe, Moscow was a more reliable ally than Tehran, and any kind of pan-Persian nationalism was rapidly shut down by the authorities.

Friendship Forever?

Rahmon's personal friendship with former Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad gave a new breath for Tajik-Iranian relations. During his visit to Iran in January 2006, Rahmon met Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, who introduced Iran as "the sincere friend of Tajikistan", and [stated](#), "The Islamic Republic will do its best to support the development and progress of Tajikistan". After that, mutual visits at different levels [intensified](#); economic relationships were taken to a new, higher level. Iran started implementing giant economic and infrastructural projects in Tajikistan, such as building hydropower stations, roads, and tunnels, even if the quality of these construction projects was relatively low. Tehran also helped Iranian businessmen to conquer the Tajik market and open small and middle-scale factories. Iranian products and companies were widely represented in the Tajik business landscape.

The Iranian business sector rushed into Tajikistan not in the name of any kind of pan-Persian solidarity, but because the economic sanctions imposed on Iran were dramatically limiting the availability of foreign markets for Iranian businesses.

In return, officials in Dushanbe raised their voice in support of the Iranian atomic program. Rahmon [declared](#) for instance: "We support Iran's peaceful atomic program. All issues related to this case should be solved only through peaceful negotiations and using various diplomatic methods". Dushanbe also started actively promoting Iran's membership into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. During that time, a younger generation of Tajiks, more Islamized, worried about the modest, but still perceptible, conversion of Tajiks into Shi'a. Fear of Iran's influence (Iranophobia), became intrinsically linked to fear of Shi'a propaganda (Shi'aphobia).

For years, Tajik authorities played their relationship to Iran well. They benefitted economically from close relations with Tehran, but at the same time accused their own domestic opposition of welcoming Shi'a's spread in Tajikistan. Emerging voices inspired by Salafi influences began vividly criticizing the Islamic Revival Party leaders as well as prominent Islamic clerics, such as the Turajonzoda brothers, for being too open to Shi'a. Here too, the Tajik authorities were able to play both cards; they imprisoned those who they identified as Salafi, but they kept their narrative against the IRPT and the Turajonzoda family. The most recent example of this ideological weapon against the IRPT was a [statement](#) by the long-silent former Tajik OMON commander, Colonel [Gulmurod Halimov](#), who defected to become an IS fighter and accused Muhiddin Kabiri of converting to Shi'a.

Kabiri for Iran: A New Ally or Just a Pawn?

In December 2015, the IRPT leader was invited to participate in an international conference called "Islamic Unity" held by the Iranian authorities in Tehran. Seats allocated to Kabiri were right next to the official delegation from Tajikistan. This was a strange decision by the Iranian organizers because the IRPT had already been declared a terrorist organization by Tajik authorities.

Tajik authorities rapidly sent official protests against Tehran's invitation of a "terrorist" party to an international conference. The Iranian ambassador to Dushanbe, Hojjatullah Fighani, was called to the Tajik Ministry of Foreign Affairs and given a letter of protest. The Tajik MFA [declared](#): "The Ministry notes with regret that Muhiddin Kabiri, former chairman of an extremist and terrorist Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan, who is under investigation by Interpol for a coup attempt, was also invited to the conference. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan does not think that this move of the conference organizers is acceptable, and states that this type of approach to enemies of the Tajik state and nation can harm the good relations between the Republic of Tajikistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran".

Saidmukarram Abduqodirzoda, Head of the Council of Ulemas of Tajikistan has been ridiculed for sitting next to Kabiri and shaking hands with him during the conference. Upon return from Iran, he devoted the very first of his Friday prayers in Dushanbe to this case. On January 1, 2016 he [stated](#): "Iran openly supports enemies of the Tajik nation. We never feuded with any state or nation, but we also want others to be friends, not only in words". Abdughaffor Yousoufov, Head of the Analytical Department at the Tajik state religious committee, published a similar statement, [asking](#), "Does Iran respect the position and laws of a brotherly country, calling Tajikistan a friend, a brother, sharing the same culture and nation and religion?"

Tajik state and pro-state media were fueled by articles condemning Iran; the Tajik pro-government troll army in the social media published memes targeting Kabiri and Iranian clerics. Surprisingly, former OMON commander, Colonel Halimov, who has been long silent since leaving Tajikistan for the Islamic State, appeared again joining the army of those who labelled Kabiri as Shia.

The first response from Tehran to all these Tajik protests was a publication by the Iranian media of a picture showing [Kabiri shaking hands and talking with the Iranian spiritual leader Seyyed Ali Khamenei](#).



In recent years, Dushanbe has been skillfully using the West's indifference to silence its opposition and build an artificial civil society, protesting somewhat spontaneously against Western policies. For instance, state media pressure turned into organized [small-scale protests](#) near the embassies of the United States for granting asylum to former prime minister Abdumalik Abdullojonov. The state media also criticized the United Kingdom when its ambassador travelled to the Badakhshan region after the 2012 military clashes, and Germany for allowing Tajik opposition activists to hold protests there. But "young patriots" and "brave Tajik mothers" did not protest in front of the Iranian Embassy in Dushanbe for having invited Kabiri.

Iran-Saudi Games in Tajikistan

Tajikistan mostly relies on Russia politically and China economically. However, it still needs Iranian support at times, especially to stand against Uzbekistan's pressures. But the Tajik authorities seem to understand that they can find other allies in the Islamic world, as seen with the [official visit of President Rahmon](#) to Saudi Arabia.

Iran and Saudi Arabia play against each other not only in the Middle East—Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Bahrain, etc.—but in other arenas too, such as Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Despite the official ban of the Saudi ideology of Wahhabism in Tajikistan and the limited economic and political interests of the rich Gulf Arabs toward Central Asia, the [latest cable leaks](#) by Wikileaks from the Saudi Arabian Embassy in Dushanbe demonstrated that most Saudi activities in the country are focused on decreasing the influence of Iran. Even if Riyadh does not enjoy the same cultural or historical closeness to Tajiks, it will not pass up the chance to cut Tehran from one of its close allies, especially when Iran does not have many friends to choose from.

During his trip to Saudi Arabia, President Rahmon met King Salman, [performed the Hajj](#), gained permission to enter Kaaba with all of his family, and returned with several cooperation contracts and a promise from the Islamic Development Bank of \$108 million to build highways in the east of country. This amount might be nothing for Saudis, but it means a lot for Tajikistan, both economically and politically. Economically, the country is in crisis due to the decrease in migrants' remittances from Russia, and any additional money is crucial. Politically, Emomali Rahmon has shown to the Iranians that his trip to Saudi Arabia was fruitful, bringing back with him more money than the Islamic Development Bank has given Dushanbe since 2002 (slightly more than \$80 million).

Dushanbe moves, Dushanbe wins?

The Tajik authorities reacted emotionally to Kabiri's invitation from Tehran, and they might have regretted it if the Iranian leadership had decided to take a more open stance in supporting the IRPT. But Tehran decided that it needs support from the Tajik authorities more than a weak Islamic opposition in exile. Two weeks after inviting Kabiri to Tehran, Iran's Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohammad Javad Zarif [sent a letter](#) to his Tajik counterpart noting that Tehran wants "to strengthen national unity in Tajikistan and is ready to cooperate in fighting extremism in the region". The letter followed the Iranian's parliament's [ratification of a security deal](#) with Tajikistan.

This little diplomatic victory of a small and poor Tajikistan over a regional power such as Iran is particularly remarkable, especially at a time when Iran is out of sanctions and getting a large array of new friends. Dushanbe has been able to benefit from the wars of influence between Iran and Gulf countries, in particular Saudi Arabia, over the region. Dushanbe can also now demand Tehran's silence over controversial Iranian businessman [Babak Zanjani](#).

Iran has a century-long past as a regional hegemon and has been willing to stand up against the West for decades. In the country's small diplomatic tensions with Tajikistan, is Iran going to take one step back without the aim of taking two steps forward? If Tehran decided that Kabiri is useless, then the game is over for him. However, if the Tajik authorities' emotional response to the Kabiri invitation has offended Iran, or if the Iranian government does not get all it wants from Dushanbe, the show will go on.