

Iran and Tajikistan - Towards Pragmatic Relations?

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Last week Iran's **President Rouhani** concluded a trip to Tajikistan to [attend CICA](#). The visit of the Iranian president to Dushanbe came after a period of four years. The last meeting between the Presidents of the two countries was in [September 2014](#). This time there was a visible thaw in relations between Tehran and Dushanbe. Iran's **Foreign Minister Javad Zarif** had visited Dushanbe last month and Tajikistan's **Foreign Minister Sirodjidin Mukhriddin** made a trip to Tehran, where some security and political agreements [were signed](#).

In recent years, however, relations between the two neighbours have not always been cordial. In 2015, the main opposition party to Rahmon, Islamic Renaissance of Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) was banned. The process of banning IRPT was started in 2011 by the classified protocol No. 32-20. Bobojon Qayumov, speaker of the IRPT party told the author that an official letter by the prosecutor general's office was sent to the party and given a ten - day deadline to stop activities by 5th September 2015. However, the incident involving former deputy defense minister, Abduhalim Nazarzoda, which Rahmon's government called a coup and opposition considered a state-backed plot to purge IRPT supporters, made it easier for the Tajik state to ban IRPT.

Thus began the souring of relations between Tehran and Dushanbe. Iran was traditionally the main supporter of Tajik United Opposition in the civil war of the 1990s. On the Tajik Peace Accord which was identified and submitted by the UN, Iran was also a peacemaker and [guarantor](#) for the treaty on the opposition side. It means that the opposition expected Tehran to protect their interests against possible betrayal by the Tajik state. Of course, the Russian Federation was on the other side. So, apparently Iran would be considered as an obstacle to Rahmon's plans.

That was why Rahmon took aim at Iran during the first step of the September 2015 incidents and issues of IRPT. When IRPT leader, Muhiddin Kabiri, invited to attend *International Islamic Unity Conference* in Tehran, had a short meeting with Iranian Supreme Leader Seyed Ali Khamenei, it [enraged officials in Dushanbe](#). Relations had gone only downhill from there.

Iranian businessmen were on Dushanbe's list. Trade dropped from \$165 million in 2015 to \$92 million in 2018. Many [Iranian government organizations](#) and charities were forced to suspend their activities in Dushanbe - including the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee and the Cultural Center of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The flights stopped and lots of Iranian companies forced to [leave Tajikistan](#). Some fake [documentaries](#) was broadcasted on Tajik state television blaming Iran for Tajik civil war!

It didn't stop there. Dushanbe went on to [blame Iran](#) for terrorist attacks on its soil. In 2018, Dushanbe blamed terrorists were led by an "active member" of the banned IRPT who

“underwent training in Iran’s Qom and Mazandaran” for an attack on foreign tourists. ISIS had claimed the attack soon and then released a video of cyclist killers’ [pledging allegiance](#) to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. However, Tajikistan dismissed it and pinned the blame on IRPT and Iran, while they knew that Qom is a central Shia city of Iran which could not be related to any ISIS ideology. Tehran [summoned](#) the Tajik ambassador and strongly objected Interior ministry’s statement. It was the first time that Iran reacted sternly to Tajikistan.

Tajikistan also worked to [halt Iran’s full membership](#) of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. After Iran’s nuclear deal and United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231, while China and Russia supported Iran’s membership to SCO, Tajikistan was the one which objected.

At this time while Rahmon tried to keep distance from Tehran by getting more friendly with [Saudi Arabia](#), Iran tried to be patient and overlook Tajik mischiefs to focus and deal with more pressing issues of JCPOA and the Middle East. At the same time, Tehran also didn’t escalate disputes with Rahmon. While Iran was a potential destination for banned IRPT members, Kabiri stated that Iran was [not prepared](#) for hosting Tajik opposition in 2015 as in the 1990s.

However, with Trump’s withdrawal from JCPOA, Iran has looked more precisely at Central Asian neighbors including Tajikistan. A process of rebuilding the relations has started. The direct flights of Mashhad- Dushanbe has resumed after an eight month [halt](#), Presidents and Foreign Ministers has met, former Deputy Foreign Ministers appointed as new ambassadors and the companies are coming back to resume bilateral trade and business.

The new relations of Dushanbe and Tehran is on a new platform. IRPT have always been part of Iran-Tajikistan relations after the peace treaty. But now it seems that we are facing a more non-ideologic and interest-based approach from Tehran by ignoring traditional partner (IRPT). It would considerably affect the relations in political, security and economic aspects. A significant decline on the depth of relations would be expected, which is desirable for Rahmon. IRPT as an Islamic and pro-Iran group, has helped Tehran to make a good image in mostly rural and traditional society of Tajikistan, in which the government has tried to ruin it in recent years.

But Iran has not disassociated from the IRPT and that’s a dilemma for the new relations. After Mukhriddin’s meetings in Tehran, while Iran was in holidays of Eid al-Fitr, Tajik foreign ministry website published a [report of the visit](#). At the report, the foreign ministry claimed “the Iranian side stressed that it will prevent on its territory the activities of members and supporters of terrorist and extremist groups and parties, including the Islamic Renaissance Party”. But just before Rouhani’s Central Asian tour, the name of the IRPT was [removed](#) from the report.

It seems that while the Tajik state has repeatedly requested for absolute severing of Iran-IRPT relations, Tehran has not agreed to do so. But regarding Rahmon’s concerns as a sign of confidence building, Tehran might have reduced relations.

The other point is about the shift in power in Tajikistan. Since 2015, by purging the country of any opposition and 2016, May 22 referendum which paved the way for young Rustam, there are signs of preparing for a shift in power. In this way, Rahmon wants Iran on a favourable position with Rustam. The experience of the 1990s’ shift in power from Soviet to independent Tajikistan, made Tajik president to care about Iran. Tehran has still a

considerable influence over Tajikistan and if it decides so can put Rahmon's succession plans in serious trouble. On the other hand, Iran would wait to deal with new president on traditional relations, considering IRPT. While IRPT is getting more active in the EU by making coalitions such as the National Alliance, the President's family is getting more and more worried, and hence they are trying their best to purge the opposition completely.

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