

Navigating Geopolitical Complexity: Iran, Türkiye, and the Quest for Middle East-South Caucasus Interconnectedness

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This article explores the multifaceted geopolitical dynamics underpinning the Middle East and South Caucasus regions and emphasizes the profound historical interconnectedness between them. It highlights the importance of reviving and promoting the interconnectedness and inter-cooperation between the two regions, particularly in an era of changing geopolitical landscapes surrounding the US and Russia. Central to the theme of the article are Iran and Türkiye, two critical regional actors whose roles and policies profoundly influence the interconnectedness of the Middle East and South Caucasus regions. The author argues that, while Iran presents a geographical opportunity to promote interconnectedness, realities on ground reflect another image. In stark contrast, it is argued that Türkiye could be a unifying force. The article sheds light on significant initiatives spearheaded by Türkiye, notably the Middle Corridor, the Gulf Corridor, and the Zangezur Corridor. These endeavours are viewed not just as modern infrastructure projects, but as a reflection of the ancient Silk Road's spirit of connectivity and cooperation. Against the backdrop of a constantly evolving global geopolitical landscape, the article underscores the paramount importance of bolstering such regional interconnectedness to usher in economic synergies, enhanced security cooperation, and a robust cultural exchange, thereby contributing to regional stability and shared prosperity.

Keywords: Middle East, South Caucasus, Iran, Türkiye, Interconnectedness.



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Introduction

From a geopolitical standpoint, the strategic importance of the Middle East and South Caucasus regions cannot be overstated. The Middle East is located at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and Africa. The region is rich in natural resources, including fossil fuels. It is home to some of the world's most important oil and gas resources. The vast reserves of oil and gas have made it an economic powerhouse. Countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, the UAE, and Kuwait are pivotal players in the global oil market. Others, such as Qatar and Algeria, have great impact on the global gas market. The vast energy resources, especially in the Gulf region, elevate the importance of these countries in the global economy.

The Middle East is also strategically important due to the Suez Canal and the Strait of Hormuz, two of the world's most important choke points for maritime trade and the world's busiest shipping routes. The Suez Canal facilitates a significant portion of global trade, linking the Red Sea to the Mediterranean. Its significance is underscored by the 2021 blockage¹ that disrupted global supply chains. Similarly, the Strait of Hormuz, a narrow passage between the Arabian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, sees a substantial portion of the world's oil shipments. Any disruption here can have cascading effects on global energy security.

Similarly, the South Caucasus, roughly corresponding to the territory of Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, is strategically important due to its location at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. Nestled between the Black and Caspian seas, the South Caucasus serves as a natural bridge between Europe and Asia. Its importance stems from the fact that it is energy rich, particularly Azerbaijan, and is adjacent to the Caspian Sea region. It is also home to the Caucasus Mountains, which form a natural barrier between Europe and Asia. Its geo-economic significance increases as a result of it being an energy corridor between exporters in the East and consumers in the West. The Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline exemplifies this, transporting oil from Azerbaijan's Caspian fields through Georgia and Türkiye to Mediterranean shores. Another mega project – the Southern Gas Corridor, originating from Azerbaijan's Shah-Deniz gas field and stretching to Europe through Georgia and Türkiye – not only

¹ Chellel, K., Campbell, M., and Oanh Ha, K., "Six Days in Suez: The Inside Story of the Ship That Broke Global Trade", *Bloomberg*, June 24, 2021, available at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2021-06-24/how-the-billion-dollar-ever-given-cargo-ship-got-stuck-in-the-suez-canal> (Accessed: October 3, 2023)

boosts the economies of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye, but also helps to diversify Europe's energy sources, thus reducing its dependence on Russian gas.

Middle East–South Caucasus interconnectedness

The Middle East and the South Caucasus have historically been intertwined,² not just geographically, but also through a web of trade, culture, religion, and diplomacy.³ Their shared legacy of the Silk Road epitomizes this connection; goods, ideas, and beliefs flowed seamlessly along this route, enriching both regions. This historical connectedness laid the foundation for mutual understanding, shared values, and collaborative endeavours for centuries. The Silk Road, a vast network of trade routes, stands as a symbol of the deep-rooted interconnectedness between the Middle East and the South Caucasus.

Economically, the Silk Road elevated the Middle East and South Caucasus as pivotal commercial hubs, with cities like Aleppo, Baku, and Tbilisi thriving as trade centres. This economic significance also had geopolitical ramifications, as control over sections of the Silk Road became a strategic objective for empires. The enduring legacy of the Silk Road underscores the historical, cultural, and geopolitical ties that bind the Middle East and South Caucasus, highlighting their shared past and intertwined destinies.

Beyond the exchange of tangible goods such as silks and spices, this ancient pathway facilitated a profound era of cultural and intellectual exchange. The Middle East, with its centres of learning and commerce, absorbed and disseminated knowledge, while the South Caucasus, positioned at a strategic crossroads, became a melting pot of diverse ideas, beliefs, and cultures. As merchants and travellers journeyed along these routes, they carried with them not just commodities, but also ideologies, knowledge, and artistic expressions. This led to a remarkable cultural syncretism.

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2 Bishku, M., “Is the South Caucasus Region a Part of the Middle East?”, *Journal of Third World Studies*, vol. XXXII, no. 1, 2015, pp. 83-102.

3 Chankvetadze, N., Murusidze, K., “The ties that bind: The South Caucasus and the Middle East”, *Middle East Institute*, January 24, 2020, available at: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/ties-bind-south-caucasus-and-middle-east> (Accessed: October 3, 2023)

However, when the two regions fell under the colonial hegemony of East and West, the connectedness was shattered, intra- and inter-regional cooperation vanished, and a huge gap was created between the two regions, only to be widened later by regional actors such as Russia and Iran. Despite this, the intrinsic significance of both regions has rendered them arenas for global power dynamics. The USA, with its strategic imperatives; Russia, with its historical hegemony; China, with its expansive Belt and Road Initiative; and regional actors such as Iran and Türkiye are all seeking strategic inroads.

The intricate tapestry of geopolitical dynamics in the Middle East and South Caucasus underscores their centrality in global affairs. With the decline of the USA, and the weakening of Russia's regional influence, there is an opportunity, and an urgent need, for the two regions to once more promote interconnectivity and elevate mutual cooperation.

In today's global dynamics, regional interconnectedness and cooperation are more crucial than ever. At the heart of this lies the promise of economic synergies. By joining forces, the Middle East and the South

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Caucasus can unlock new opportunities for trade and investment, thereby creating a mutually beneficial partnership that benefits both regions. This type of collaboration has the potential to open up vast markets, creating new pathways for growth and prosperity. The ultimate goal is to enhance economic growth and uplift the living standards of the populations.

Moreover, infrastructure, often the backbone of economic growth, benefits immensely from regional cooperation, thus offering new possibilities when countries come together to build highways that traverse continents or pipelines that connect energy hubs. Such endeavours not only fuel economies but also weave regions closer together, both literally and metaphorically.

Yet, the benefits of regional cooperation are not just economic. There is a ripple effect on security and stability. By joining hands, regions can present a united front against any shared threat, be it foreign powers, terrorism, organized crime, or any other. Taking into account the valuable lessons drawn from history and contemporary geopolitics, regions bound by strong economic ties are less prone to conflicts, ensuring a more harmonious and stable geopolitical landscape.

On the softer side of these ties lies the promise of strong cultural exchange. As regions interact, they revive the shared values, traditions, and customs that bonded the people of the region for centuries, thus fostering a mutual understanding and appreciation of diverse traditions and values. This not only enriches societies but also acts as a buffer against misunderstandings that could escalate into larger conflicts. Innovation, the driver of future growth, also thrives in an environment of cooperation. Countries of the Middle East and South Caucasus regions need to foster joint research initiatives, academic exchange programmes, dialogue, think-tank ties, and projects, as well as technology investment and exchange. These initiatives can fast-track advancements and bring shared benefits to the people of the two regions.

In our globalized world, challenges have also gone global. From the looming shadow of climate change to the unpredictability of pandemics, no challenge is confined to a single region and no such challenge can be countered by one country.⁴ It is here that the strength of regional cooperation shines brightest, offering collective solutions to shared challenges. Crises, unfortunately, are an inevitable part of our global narrative. Nevertheless, with regional cooperation, their impact can be mitigated. Neighbours can swiftly step in with humanitarian aid, ensuring that recovery is both quick and effective.

Moreover, there is the weight of collective voice. When regions speak in unison, the world listens. Be it in global forums or trade negotiations, a united regional front often holds more sway, ensuring that participants' interests are not sidelined. The question is, how do we start promoting interconnectedness, and where from?

Iran: An opportunity or a challenge?

Geographically speaking, Iran might offer the shortest corridor to elevate the interconnectedness and cooperation between the Middle East and South Caucasus regions. In an ideal world, this would work, and Iran's principles, priorities, and interests would align with its neighbouring countries in both regions. However, this is not the case. Iran has serious problems with most of its neighbours in the Middle

⁴ Viña, A., Liu, J. "Effects of global shocks on the evolution of an interconnected world", *Ambio*, 52, 2023, p. 95, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13280-022-01778-0> (Accessed: October 1, 2023)

East and South Caucasus. For so long, Iran has defined itself not in terms of what it can offer in terms of building bridges and enhancing regional cooperation and interconnectedness, but in terms of showing its unique capacity as a spoiler,⁵ an actor that can effectively undermine the constructive initiatives and projects of neighbouring countries just to elevate its self-importance vis-à-vis the “other”.

During the last few decades, Tehran has proved that it has difficulties engaging with its neighbouring countries as sovereign and independent states. Iran has problems with almost all its neighbours in both the Middle East and South Caucasus. These challenges stem not only from historical territorial disputes but also from the myriad geopolitical strategies and ambitions that Tehran has pursued over the years.

Iran’s Territorial Ambitions: Historically, Iran’s geopolitical aspirations have been a source of tension. A notable point of contention has been the region of South Azerbaijan, which lies within Iran’s borders. This issue underscores the deep-rooted historical complexities that often resurface in contemporary geopolitics. In the Middle East, Iran’s territorial claims extend to its Arab neighbours in the Gulf. The 1979 war with Iraq, which spanned nearly a decade, was, in part, a manifestation of these territorial disputes. Furthermore, Iran’s territorial claims on waters shared with Kuwait and Saudi Arabia,⁶ its occupation of three Emirati islands,⁷ and its audacious claim over Bahrain, which it often refers to as an Iranian province,⁸ further complicate regional dynamics. Such territorial disputes, if unresolved, can significantly strain diplomatic and economic ties.

5 Sadjadpour, K., and Ben Taleblu, B., “Iran in the Middle East: leveraging chaos”, *Friede*, Policy Brief no. 202, May 2015, available at: https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/191161/Iran%20in%20the%20Middle%20East_%20leveraging%20chaos.pdf (Accessed: October 1, 2023)

6 Bakir, A., “How the Dorra gas field could disrupt warming relations between Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait”, *Atlantic Council*, August 30, 2023, available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/arash-dorra-gas-field-iran-saudi-kuwait/> (Accessed: October 5, 2023)

7 Harrison, R., “The GCC versus Iran: Low Intensity War, High Intensity Conflict”, *Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies*, April 4, 2021, available: <https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/Lists/ACRPS-PDFDocumentLibrary/The-GCC-versus-Iran-Low-Intensity-War-High-Intensity-Conflict.pdf> (Accessed: October 20, 2023)

8 Alfonch, A., “Bahrain Reduced to Province of Iran on President Raisi’s Instagram”, *AGSIW*, July 8, 2022, available at: <https://agsiw.org/bahrain-reduced-to-province-of-iran-on-president-raisis-instagram/> (Accessed: October 4, 2023)

The Shadow of Iran’s Nuclear Ambitions: Iran’s nuclear pursuits have been a focal point of regional and global apprehension. This programme poses two primary challenges to cross-regional cooperation between the Middle East and the South Caucasus. First, the sanctions imposed on Iran, as a consequence of its nuclear endeavours, have had cascading effects on its neighbouring regions, impeding economic cooperation and integration. Second, the potential militarization of Iran’s nuclear programme could escalate regional tensions, with the spectre of conflict looming large. If Iran were to acquire nuclear weapons, it could disrupt the regional balance of power, possibly igniting a nuclear arms race involving key players such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Türkiye.

The Sectarian Dimension: While Iran stands unique as a nation that intertwines its religious and sectarian identity, as enshrined in its constitution, the real concern arises from its use of sectarianism as a tool in its foreign policy. This approach has often been at odds with the interests of its neighbours in both the Middle East and the South Caucasus. Although Iran highlights its ties with Sunni groups and its relationship with Armenia to showcase its non-sectarian stance, a closer examination of its actions suggests a different narrative. The use of sectarianism, whether overt or covert, has been a defining feature of Iran’s regional strategy.

Iran’s Proxy Engagements: Iran’s reliance on proxy militias and conflicts is a multifaceted issue. While conventional wisdom suggests that, post-1979, Iran has employed proxies due to its weaker conventional military, historical precedents, such as the Shah regime’s use of Kurdish proxies against Iraq, challenge this notion.⁹ Regardless of the reasons, Iran’s heavy dependence on proxy militias has strained its relations with many countries. Its overt involvement in proxy wars in nations like Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, coupled with covert operations in other states, underscores the challenges posed by Iran’s regional strategies.¹⁰

Iran’s geopolitical manoeuvres, driven by a mix of territorial ambitions,

9 Van Bruinessen, M., “The Kurds between Iran and Iraq”, *MERIP Middle East Report*, no. 141, July-August 1986, pp. 14-27, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3011925> (Accessed: October 5, 2023)

10 Loft, P., “Iran’s influence in the Middle East”, *UK-Parliament*, Commons Library Research Briefing, April 14, 2023, available at: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9504/CBP-9504.pdf> (Accessed: October 10, 2023)

nuclear aspirations, sectarian strategies, and proxy engagements, present a complex web of challenges for regional stability and cooperation. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for crafting informed policies aimed at fostering interconnectedness between the Middle East and the South Caucasus. In other words, while Iran should be considered in terms of its advantages in terms of interconnectedness for both regions, the reality on the ground should not be ignored.

Bypassing Iran: The Turkish Option

While Iran constitutes a serious challenge to the idea of interconnectedness between the Middle East and the South Caucasus regions, it can be bypassed, both physically and virtually, via Türkiye. However, this alternative may require additional expense, time, and effort in the short term. Türkiye's geostrategic importance to the Middle East and the South Caucasus is shaped by a combination of its geographical location, economic interests, security dynamics, and historical and

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cultural ties. Its role as both a bridge and a player in these regions underscores its significance in shaping the geopolitical landscape of the broader region.

Türkiye's position at the crossroads of Europe and Asia has historically rendered it a pivotal actor in the geopolitical realm, especially concerning the Middle East and the South Caucasus. This unique geographical placement has endowed Türkiye with a role that extends beyond mere territorial significance; it acts as a conduit for trade, culture, and knowledge, seamlessly linking the diverse landscapes of the Middle East, the South Caucasus, and Europe.

One of the most tangible manifestations of Türkiye's geostrategic importance is its role as an energy hub. The nation has astutely positioned itself as an indispensable energy transit hub. Projects such as the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline and the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) crisscross its terrain, channelling oil and gas from the resource-rich Caspian region to the energy-hungry markets of Europe. Similarly, the Iraq–Türkiye Pipeline (ITP) carries Iraq's oil to the global market via Ceyhan on the Mediterranean and

contributes about 0.5% of global crude supply.¹¹ This not only amplifies Türkiye's strategic influence but also fortifies the energy security matrix of European nations and ensures the oil resources of the Middle East region and the South Caucasus reach the global market smoothly.

Economically, Türkiye has been proactive in weaving a web of trade and investment across these regions. Its burgeoning economic partnerships and ventures underscore its commitment to regional stability, interdependence, and prosperity. The Middle Corridor and the Gulf Corridor are two strategic initiatives, both actively promoted by Türkiye, aimed at enhancing connectivity and trade not only in the Middle East and South Caucasus, but also between these two regions and the world.

1. **The Middle Corridor**¹² is also known as the Trans-Caspian East–West Middle Corridor Initiative. It is a revival of the ancient Silk Road, beginning in Türkiye and passing through the South Caucasus countries of Georgia and Azerbaijan before crossing the Caspian Sea, traversing Central Asia, and terminating in China. The corridor aims to develop connectivity between East and West, thereby offering important economic opportunities for Central Asian countries to benefit from trade between China and Europe.
2. **Türkiye's Gulf Corridor:** This is a proposed trade corridor linking Europe to the Middle East and Asia via the Iraq Development Road initiative,¹³ which is proposed to link the Gulf in the south through Iraq to Türkiye and from there east towards China and west towards the UK. The Abu Dhabi wealth fund ADQ is reportedly in talks with Türkiye to build a railway over the Bosphorus in Istanbul as part of this corridor.¹⁴ Türkiye wants to use its strategic geographic

11 Reuters, *Turkey says to re-start operations of Iraq oil pipeline this week*, October 2, 2023, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/turkey-says-re-start-operations-iraq-oil-pipeline-this-week-2023-10-02/> (Accessed: October 10, 2023)

12 Invest, *Türkiye's "Middle Corridor" Integrates Asia and Europe*, November 8, 2019, available at: <https://www.invest.gov.tr/en/News/News-from-Turkey/Pages/turkey-middle-corridor-integrates-asia-and-europe.aspx> (Accessed: October 20, 2023)

13 Samson, A., "Turkey floats alternative to G20's India-Middle East trade corridor plan", *Financial Times*, September 17, 2023, available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/0673f928-dec9-48fb-83b3-8b868a9dcbbe> (Accessed: October 20, 2023)

14 Al-monitor, *Abu Dhabi's ADQ in talks with Turkey to build railway for trade corridor*, October 5, 2023, Available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/10/abu-dhabis-adq-talks-turkey-build-railway-trade-corridor> (Accessed: October 22, 2023)

position to help establish a trade corridor between London, the Gulf, and Beijing. Türkiye is promoting this corridor as an alternative to India–Middle East trade corridor plan.¹⁵

3. **The Zangezur Corridor:**¹⁶ Following the liberation of its territory from Armenian occupation in 2020 and 2023, Azerbaijan has been pushing to realize the Zangezur Corridor with the support of Türkiye. The proposed corridor would connect Azerbaijan’s main territory with its landlocked Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic through Armenia.¹⁷ This project would boost intra-connectedness and cooperation within the South Caucasus. The corridor could also become a critical node in the interconnectedness between the South Caucasus and the Middle East as it connects Türkiye to Azerbaijan through Nakhchivan. Surprisingly, when Armenia expressed resistance to the idea, Iran showed willingness to allow the corridor to pass via its territory.¹⁸ Whether this is a way to guarantee control over it and gain leverage over Azerbaijan and Türkiye, or it is a tactical manoeuvre to absorb the pressure applied on Armenia to proceed with the original project, remains to be seen.

Defence-wise, Türkiye’s membership of NATO amplifies its strategic weight. As an increasingly autonomous regional power, Türkiye provides a robust counterbalance in a region that often grapples with volatility,¹⁹ especially given its proximity to the Middle East’s intricate conflict zones and US military presence, as well as to the South Caucasus, where Russia traditionally flexes its muscles and Iran tries

15 Blair, A., “Turkey moves against Europe with trade corridor alternative to IPEC”, *Railway Technology*, September 20, 2023, available at: <https://www.railway-technology.com/news/turkey-alternative-india-middle-east-trade-corridor-plan/> (Accessed: October 23, 2023)

16 Bakir, A., “Why Iran is sabotaging an Armenia–Azerbaijan peace deal”, *The New Arab*, November 28, 2022, available at: <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/why-iran-sabotaging-armenia-azerbaijan-peace-deal> (Accessed: October 26, 2023)

17 Rehimov, R., “Zangezur corridor to provide new link between Turkey, Azerbaijan”, *Anadolu Agency*, June 1, 2021, available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/zangezur-corridor-to-provide-new-link-between-turkey-azerbaijan/2260088> (Accessed: October 29, 2023)

18 Aghayev, I., “Azerbaijan begins construction of corridor to Nakhchivan through Iran”, *OC Media*, October 9, 2023, available at: <https://oc-media.org/azerbaijan-begins-construction-of-corridor-to-nakhchivan-through-iran/> (Accessed: October 29, 2023)

19 Bakir, A., “Turkey’s security role in the Gulf region: exploring the case of a newcomer”, *Turkish Studies*, v. 24, no. 5, 2023, pp. 809-831, available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14683849.2023.2182686> (Accessed: October 30, 2023)

to expand its influence. Concurrently, on the security front, Türkiye's stance on pivotal issues, ranging from the Syrian quagmire to its nuanced relations with regional powerhouses like Iran and Russia, plays a decisive role in shaping the security dynamics of the region.

Beyond the realms of hard power and strategic positioning, Türkiye's influence is also felt through its deep-rooted cultural, ethnic, religious, and historical ties with countries in both the Middle East and the South Caucasus. These shared bonds, cultivated over millennia, serve as invaluable diplomatic conduits, fostering avenues for cooperation even amidst the fluctuation of regional tensions. Türkiye's soft power, emanating from its vibrant cultural exports, media outreach, and educational initiatives, among other things, further cement its regional role and, if utilized in an appropriate way, will enable the idea of interconnectedness between the Middle East and the South Caucasus to be realized.

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Conclusion

The Middle East and the South Caucasus, both historically significant regions, have served as pivotal junctures for empires, trade routes, and cultural exchange. Their geographical locations have positioned them as gateways, facilitating interactions between East and West, and North and South. Their vast energy reserves, particularly oil and gas, have not only driven their domestic economies but have also positioned them as critical nodes in the global energy matrix. This historical centrality has endowed both regions with a rich amalgam of cultures, resulting in a diverse mosaic of ethnicities and religions.

The Middle East and South Caucasus stand at a crossroads. With the shifting sands of global power dynamics marked by US decline, the rise of China, and Russia's weakened hegemonic influence, their decision to foster mutual cooperation and interconnectedness could be pivotal. This evolving geopolitical landscape underscores the necessity for enhanced cooperation between the two regions, not just as a strategic

option but as a means to ensure regional stability and prosperity.

While Iran emerges as a hurdle to the idea of interconnectedness due to its policies, its willingness to embrace regional interconnectedness and be a useful and constructive actor should be investigated. As for Türkiye, its historical and geopolitical position offers a unique chance to actualize the idea of interconnectedness between the Middle East and the South Caucasus. Its deep-rooted ties in both regions make it a natural bridge, enabling smoother economic, political, and cultural pathways.