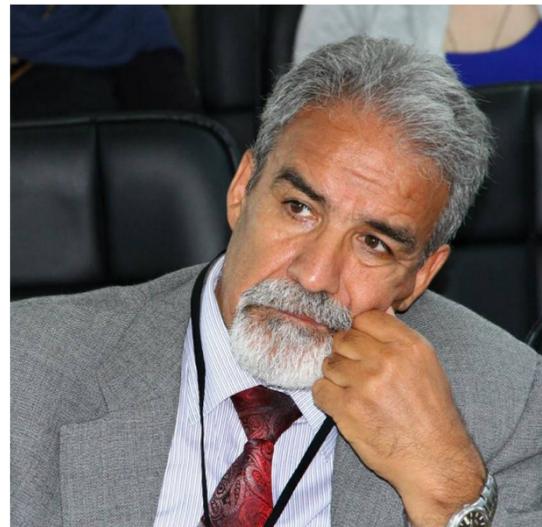


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**Amirahmadian B.**

## Iran as a Geopolitical Actor

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The article deals with a concept of Islamic Republic of Iran as an emerging regional power and significant actor in the Middle East region. Such problem is of acute interest nowadays due to the fact that Iran has a pivot place not in the Middle East region only, but such among the Shia countries as well. I develop this theme using phenomenological and classical SWOT analyses in the framework approach of political geography. I stress it is not possible to have any stability in the region without considering Iran as a geopolitical actor. I conclude that amid the world's largest Muslim countries, i.e. Iran, Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia are competing for the leadership in the Islamic world in whole and in Greater Middle East in particular, Iran have apply significant force to be a winner.

**Keywords:** Iran; Greater Middle East; geopolitical actor; leadership in the Islamic world; emerging regional power.

### Introduction

Iran is an inheritor of ancient civilization, located in south-west Asia, in a very important situation. Therefore, it is able to enjoy from its geographical location to make it 'geopolitical situation' to benefit, but it has not been succeeded. Iran has 79.1 million population in 2015 and ranks 17 among countries of the world [*World Development Indicators 2016*]. According to World Bank information, Iran's GDP in 2015 was \$425.3 billion and its rank among countries of the world, was 26 [*World Development Indicators 2016*]. It means that Iran has not the equal rank for both population and GDP.

Iran is neighboring with Turkmenistan in northeast. The road connection between Iran and Central Asia is possible only via Turkmenistan territory. Iran believes that Central Asia is part of Iranian World. Therefore, Iran tries to have closed relation with Central Asian republics, but here there are some regional and trans-regional rivals including China, Russia, Turkey as well as EU, USA, Israel.

In east, Iran has common border with Pakistan in southeastern part with 924.8 km, with an instable border threatening by terrorism, extremism and drug trafficking, vacuum of central government authority. In northeast Iran has 919.1 km common border with Afghanistan, which has the same situation like Pakistan's. But here also there are some additional problem like the lack of stable and authoritative government in Kabul and foreign military troops.

In west Iran has 1608 km border with Iraq, an instable country and most insecure country of the world. But at the same time Iran has authority in the power structure and is following its common strategic interest and also considers some concerns. Many extremist and terrorist groups are active beyond Iran near to common borderlines.

In south, Iran has 2040 km coast line in Persian Gulf (1000 km) and Sea of Oman. In Persia Gulf region, Iran is threatening by USA and its regional allies including Saudi Arabia and the 'Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf', known as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). They are backed to western allies and armed by USA to resist against Iran. They always choose enmity and hostility means and situation against Iran, while Iran invites them to implement a regional cooperation together without the West security arrangement.

In north west, Iran has common border with Azerbaijan (756.8 km), Armenia (45 km) and Nakhchivan Autonomous Republics (mentioned in Azerbaijan border) [*AZERTAC 2016*]. After the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia from the threshold of collapse of Soviet Union in 1988–1994, about 20% of Azerbaijani territory occupied by Armenia, the border land between Iran and Armenia by de facto increased from 44 km to 120 km. It is a disputed area along Araxes River, which Iran is not able to implement border common activities, because in left bank there is no internationally recognized political entity.

Also in remote North West, Iran from 1950s is bordering with a NATO member, Turkey, but there is no dispute in any means and they have a closed friendly relation in many fields even in security issues. The common border lines between Iran and Turkey is about 534 km.

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**Fig. 1.** Map of Iran and its neighbors, from the website <http://www.clubs.psu.edu/up/iranian/iran.htm>

**Fig. 2.** Map of Greater Iran, from the website <http://moppy771.deviantart.com/art/Greater-Iran-587818974>

**Emerging New Situation in the Region**

Iran's Islamic Revolution took place in February 1979. After that a 'political Islam' emerged and some Islamic country followed it, but even for neighboring countries this model had not applied, accepted and implemented. So it has been remained a unique government only in Iran. Islamic republic of Pakistan from 1947 and Islamic republic of Afghanistan from 2000s enjoy their own structure quite different with Iran's.

An eight years of imposed war of Iraq against Iran, caused enormous changes in the power structure, social and economic structure of Iran. Occupation of Afghanistan by Soviet troops in 1979 resulted to fleeing of 3 million Afghan refugees to Iran's territory by passing common borderlines which was not protected well during the victory of the Islamic Revolution. The consequence of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 has changed the geopolitical situations in the adjacent regions of Iran in the north as well as in the south. Iran neighbored by 3 new countries of the former Soviet Union in the north (Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan and Armenia) from 1991. The conflict between Azerbaijan with Armenia over the Upper Karabakh from early 1988 damaged the region stability as well as Iran's relations with both of them.

Before conflict, the distance common international border between Iran and Armenia was 44 km. After Armenia's occupation of Upper Karabakh and surrounding areas, the border has been exceeded to 120 km. Possibility of bilateral economic co-operation in common borders has been abolished because at the other side is not an internationally recognized state. Collaborative relations between Iran and the occupied territory will damage the bilateral relations with Azerbaijan.

After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, the Afghan civil war between mujahedin factions worsened the situation and hope for the return of Afghan refugees not only lost, but they also have resulted in increased refugees.

The rise of the Taliban in 1994—2001 damaged the face of moderate Islam in the world. The emerging of Taliban and Al Qaeda terrorist forces in the political scene of Afghanistan had many negative effects in the region's situation and made it more complicated. Introducing Iran, North Korea and Iraq as the Axis of Evil, increased the anti-America's attitude in the region.

September 11 event, the U.S.A and its allies military attack to Afghanistan by an international coalition (ISAF) by the permission of security council of UN, lessened the regional cooperation of region's countries to play positive roles in solving Afghanistan problems in the basis of capabilities and capacities of the region.

U.S. military invasion to Iraq by international coalition forces in 2003 and the fall of Saddam Hussein regime changed the situation of the region to the worst manner. Iraq has become the most dangerous place in the world. Invasion to Iraq has changed the equitation of the power in the region. Iran has lost its actual enemy (Taliban and Saddam) by its another great enemy (USA) and became more powerful than before. Now, Iraq is the most dangerous country, although there is no government in Somalia but the situation in Iraq is more worsen than Somalia.

The second Big Ben in the Middle East was 'The Arab Spring'. Syrian issue in the Middle East is a catastrophic along with Libya. Iran has many common interests and concerns with Syria because of resistance front against Israeli occupation of Muslim territory of Palestine. At the same time Iran has strategic cooperation with Syria. Sectarian and ethnic disputes and clashes sometimes resulted to involvement in the killings and massacres in the region. What Iran says about the region is that without the disturbing and interference of outside powers, the region has enough power to solve the problem of the region.

**Developments in the Middle East and North Africa**

Arab Spring movement, which covered Tunisia, Libya and Egypt in North Africa, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, had disrupted the order of the stability in the Middle East region. This development, which known as Arab Spring in the world media, Iran's authorities, media and political leaders called it 'Islamic Awakening', but in none of them had established the model of the 'Islamic Republic of Iran'. It means that the Idea of Islamic revolution had not been implemented in the Middle East region among Islamic countries. Now the dispute

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between Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi Arabia upon to lead Islamic World in the framework of Islamic rule, is going to start a new situation in the Middle East, which is not clear what would be happen in the future and what outcome it will have.



Fig. 3. Map of Greater Middle East, from the website <http://www.ilcaffegeopolitico.org/19637/prospettive-storiche-strategiche-medio-oriente-cambia>

**Strengths**

- Some of Iranian and foreign political leaders, are quietly right to describe Iran as a 'Island of Stability' in the region and a regional power.
  - In the beginning of revolution Iran had a population of about 35 million, but today it has 79 million, and estimated that in 2025, it will increase to 110 million populations ["2016 World Population..." 2016].
  - Islamic Republic of Iran in the beginning of establishment was the largest importer of agricultural products and livestock importer in the world.
  - Iran currently produces over 13 million tons of wheat annually, more than 120 million tons of agricultural products, including 20 million tons of fruit products.
- The 2015 wheat harvest concluded in mid-July. Favorable weather conditions prevailed throughout the growing season. The Government estimates the 2015 wheat production at 11.5 million tons, 8 percent above the 2014 harvest of 10.6 million tons and 16 percent above the five-year average ["Iran (Islamic Republic of)" 2016].
- At the same time, Islamic Republic of Iran is emerging as a large wheat flour exporter, accounting for about 4% of the world total (the largest wheat flour exporters, Turkey and Kazakhstan, supply about 20% each). Iranian wheat exports are destined to other countries in the region, mostly Iraq ["6. Oil and Gas" 2016].
- Recently Iran is self-sufficient in many food items (with an exception on vegetable oil and rice). Although due to climate changes and draught Iran may import more or less wheat or some other food items.
  - By twenty-year vision plan, Iran in 2025 could be most powerful country in the region in terms of military, economic, cultural, political, scientific abilities, and first place in the region.

**How Iran Would Be a Regional Power?**

What are the components of power?

**Size and shape of country:** Iran is a country roughly rectangular in shape and favorite the location is excellent for defense.

In terms of geopolitical considerations Iran provides the connection between the East-West and North-South of West Asia, by its developed rail and road networks. Iran by Caspian Sea in the North, and then through it can have connection to Europe, the Baltic Sea, as well as the Mediterranean. The North-South Transit Corridor (NOSTRAC) provides the connection between Russia-Iran-India and in

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another vision North Europe with Indian Ocean Basin. With 2424 km of coastline in the South (Persian Gulf and Arab Sea), Iran has access to warm waters and seas.

**Population:** Iran with 79.5 million inhabitants is ranked the 17th largest populous country in the world. The structure of knowledge and education of the population of Iran in the area is excellent. Proportion of university educated and skilled workforce and educated manpower of Iran has got unique place in the region.

Every year, about more than four million and a half young students, study at the universities and higher education institutes.

**Natural resources:** sea, rivers, forests and fertile plains, including about 20 million hectares of agricultural land; petroleum (with 157.8 billion barrels proven resources; natural gas, with 34 trillion cubic meters proven resources, first rank in the world ["2015 in Review..." 2016], metals (including copper, aluminum, gold, zinc, lead), coal, and others (**Fig. 4**).

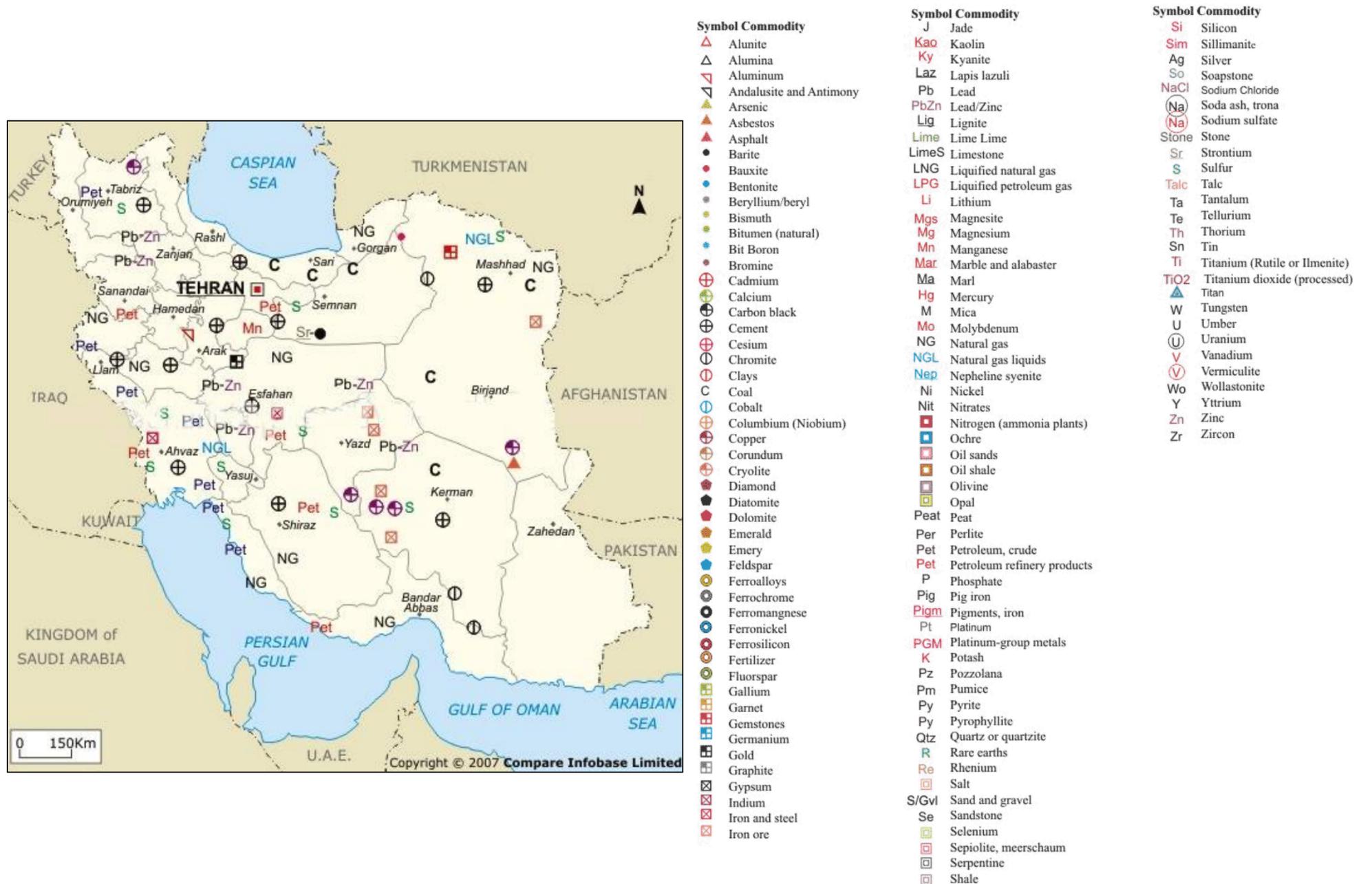


Fig. 4. Mineral map of Iran, from the website <http://www.mapsofworld.com/iran/iran-mineral-map.html>

Iran enjoys good weather condition all year round which creates a four-season climate suitable for agricultural production and tourism.

**Science and Technology:** Iranian universities and scientific centers are working in the international education standards. Some of them are ranked among the world universities, particularly the important place in the region. Gain access to the machine works and metallurgical industries, factories, and nuclear technology, nanotechnology, biotechnology, stem cells, aerospace, medicine (the head rank in the region), satellite and missile capabilities and much ballistic missile producing abilities.

Iran beside Turkey has powerful army in the region, the military stability, and faith in the power of strategic weapons from rifles to tanks and missiles, educated and skilled workforce.

**Transport and Communications:** At present situation Iran is the country with a connection rail network (**Fig. 5**) to connect Pakistan in the east to Turkey in the north-west. Persian Gulf seaports in the south via Iran's road and rail networks connect to the Central Asia in the north. Any connection of neighboring countries to the region country is welcomed by Iran. Iran is used to transit of goods of the region country approximately 12 million of tons annually. Iran has 13000 km railroads ["Economy of Iran" 2016].

In near future the construction of Chabhar — Dogharoun railroad (from Arab Sea in the south to the border checkpoint of Afghanistan in Dogharoun) will ease the connection of Indian Ocean region to Afghanistan, Central Asia and China.

Qazvin — Rasht — Anzali — Astara railway network in the near future will connect to Azerbaijan and from there to Russian railway networks.

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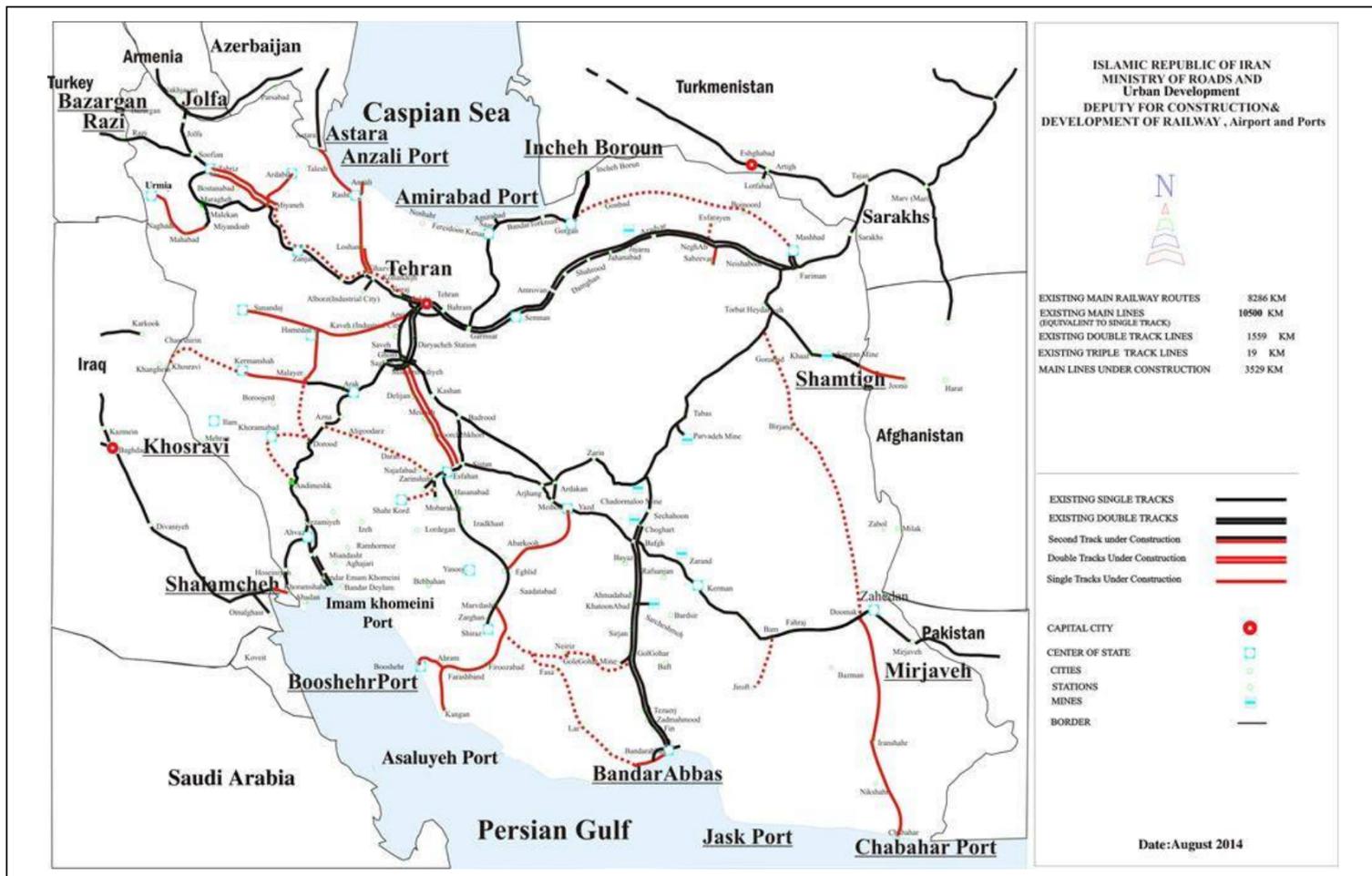


Fig. 5. Map of Iran's railway network as of Aug. 2014, from the website [http://www.rai.ir/Index.aspx?page\\_ =form&lang=2&sub=0&tempane=MainEng&PageID=981&isPopUp=False](http://www.rai.ir/Index.aspx?page_ =form&lang=2&sub=0&tempane=MainEng&PageID=981&isPopUp=False)

North-South Transport Corridor (NSTC, Fig. 6) intended to connect North Europe, Russia (via Caspian Sea) to Iran, Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean region to the countries around [Amir-Ahmadian 2016.b].

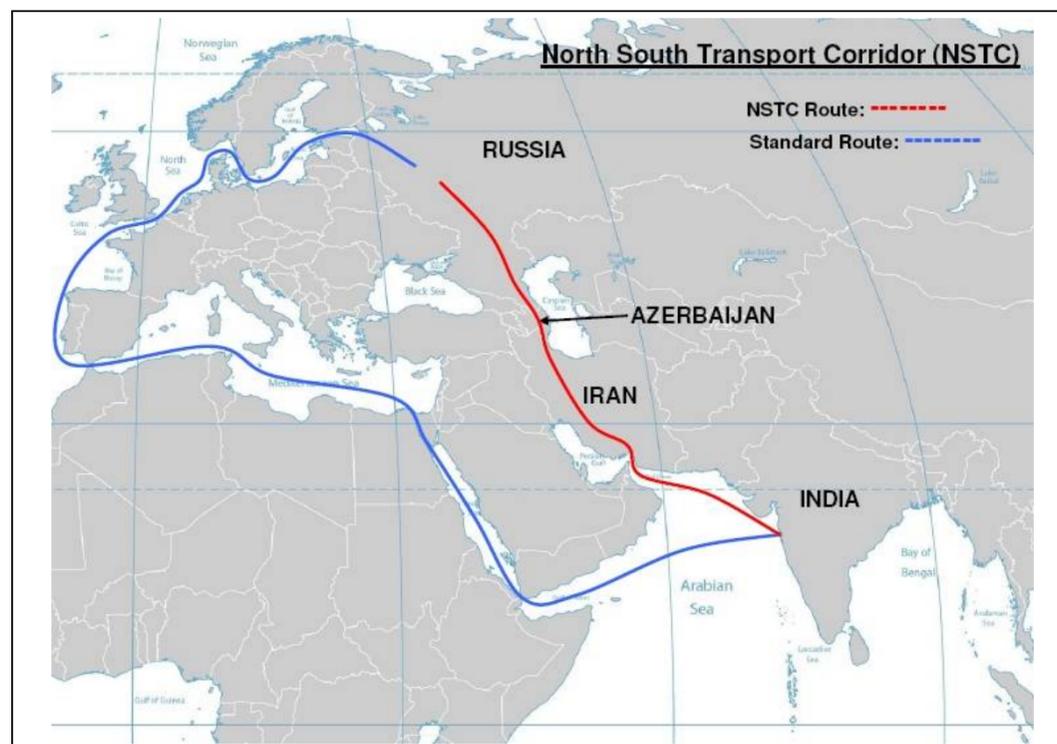


Fig. 6. Map of North South Transport Corridor route vs standard route from India [Amir-Ahmadian 2016.b]

Iran has got the largest tanker fleet in the world which is able to carry Iranian petroleum to the world markets.

Iranian ports, including Bandar Imam, Bandar Bushehr, Bandar Chabahar in the south and Bandar Anzali, Noushahr and Amir Abad in the north (Caspian Sea), have the annual turnover capacity of exports and imports of goods about 180 million tones.

Today, mobile phones coverage is all around Iran, and telephone coverage are widespread throughout the country and many large villages, enjoy the luxury of electricity and fixed telephone network.

Iran wants to splurge up to \$8 billion over the next six years to revamp and expand its railway network, Minister of Industry, Mine and Trade Mohammad Reza Netmatzadeh said.

There are plans to stretch out the nationwide railroad line to 25000 kilometers by 2025 from under 15000 kilometers now.

Netmatzadeh said there was need for \$1.5 billion of annual investment in the next six years as part of the country's vision plan.

'My advice is that building 25000 kilometers of rail and expanding passenger and cargo transit is achievable,' he said.

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Iran currently has two contracts with France's rail transport company Alstom and Germany's Siemens to build locomotives, Nematzadeh said.

The country itself has a sizable capacity for construction of railroad cars. The minister said Iran can produce five passenger train coaches and 3000 freight wagons as well as 50–60 locomotives a year [Iran Plans... 2016].

Home to the world's most ancient highway, the 2400 km Persian Royal Road built by King Darius the Great in the 5th century BC, and later a vital artery linking the vast network of ancient trade routes known as the Silk Road, Iran has for 2500 years pushed the boundaries of human transportation.

The famous Trans-Iranian Railway extends 1392 km from the northern city of Bandar-E-Torkaman on the Caspian Sea to Bandar-E-Emam Khomeyni on the Persian Gulf [Escobar 2009]. Opened in 1939, the line took eleven years to finish and was used by Anglo-Soviet occupiers to ship arms during the Second World War.

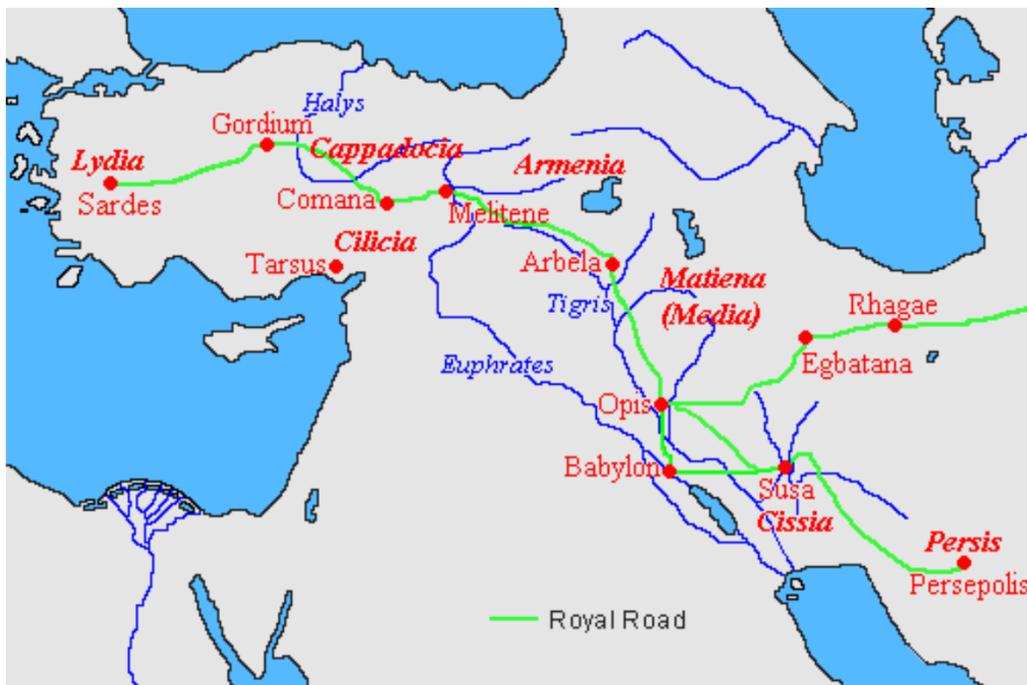


Fig. 7. Map of Royal Road, from the website [http://www.iranchamber.com/history/achaemenids/royal\\_road.php](http://www.iranchamber.com/history/achaemenids/royal_road.php)



Fig. 8. Map of Trans-Iranian Railway as of 1938, with English placenames, from Wikimedia Commons [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Transiran\\_railway\\_en.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Transiran_railway_en.png)

Now, Iran's rail industry is ready for the next stage in its evolution [Amir-Ahmadian 2015, 2016.a]. The cessation of United Nations (UN) trade sanctions in January was followed by successive foreign investment deals as President Hassan Rouhani fast-tracks plans to extend the Islamic republic's rail network to 25000 km by 2025.

'Iran lies on the crossroads of the East and the West and the Silk Road. This is not a random event. It is history which says Iran is the point of equilibrium in the region,' said Transport Minister Abbas Akhoundi.

'We seek to revive the Silk Road in a modern form in all the rail, air, road and sea sectors.'

'The main objective in the rail transportation sector is to complete the entire network and shift some of the road transportation to rail, given the development of industries and mines in Iran' [Turner 2016].



Fig. 9. Map of Silk Economic Belt vs Silk Maritime Road [Amir-Ahmadian 2016.a]

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### Threats

Iran is concerning about its security threats which are as below:

- Development of opium cultivation-drug production and trafficking from Afghanistan to Iran, which increased the number of drug, addicted persons in Iran as well as in Afghanistan and spread of it among young generation. Nowadays it is reported that 3 million of Iranian youth has been addicted to drug consumption, which produce by Muslim brothers in Afghanistan. Drug trafficking damages not only Iran society, but also world community.
- The war between Armenia and Azerbaijan (ceasefire has been implemented by Minsk Group from May 1994) over Upper Karabakh, lessened bilateral cooperation between Iran and both of them.
- Growth of separatism in some areas and fields in the neighboring are as follow but Iran has enough military forces and police to overcome all threats.
- Strengthening the Kurdistan autonomy may lead to become an independent state, will affect and influence in Kurdish movement in Iran as direct neighbor region.
- Awakening of Iranian Turkic speaking ethnics, which spread all around Iran, in Azerbaijan (East and West), Zanjan, Ardabil provinces and large Azeri population of Iran (sometimes they have been exaggerated as 30 million) may result to claim to seek their cultural and ethnic rights. It is going to strengthen by some activities which are going on inside and outside of Iran including in Azerbaijan republic and Turkey. This kind of development is considered as Pan-Azerism, a branch of Pan-Turkism.
- With the growing insecurity in Baluchistan of Pakistan, the neighboring Baluchistan province of Iran will be under the influence of Balouchi separatism.
- Iran is suffering from its eastern neighbor Afghanistan in terms of terrorist attacks, the Taliban, Al-Qaeda and insecurity, drug trafficking, illegal crossing of the border by Afghan citizens, Afghan refugees and some other issues.
- Facing Iraq by the greatest terror attacks and clashes between Shia' and Sunni, Kurdish separatism and potentially degradation power from central government, has created an explosive condition in the western border of Iran.
- Pakistan is a country with high political instability (really a failed state), assassinations and attacks against the Shia' and the Sunni, strengthening of Taliban and Al-Qaeda and so on, are the elements of disorder in the region, which affects directly Iranian security and stability.

### Challenges

The world's largest Muslim country, Iran, Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia are competing for leadership of the Islamic world, the pride and strength, and more important role in the region, the nation and the effort and hard work is required.

After solving its nuclear dispute with 5+1 group, Iran now has some opportunity to play more active role in international environment. These alternatives are including:

- A.** Cooperation with West and especially with EU to participate in European energy market, especially in exporting natural gas to EU. But it needs foreign direct investment from West. Also it needs new technology to extracting and producing and constructing pipeline. It will take some years to be active in this field and considering Russia's monopoly as a real rival. Improve the relation with West, by trying to have closed political, economic and commercial relations.
- B.** Changing its relation direction to the East and work with China and Russia including choosing to join to the Chinese president initiative named: 'One Belt One Road', Eurasian Economic Council (EEC), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Iran geographical location will be changed to geopolitical situation if works with East. In both organizations, although in some extant they are as rivals, but Iran will be able to play key role to connect these two organization to the Middle East. South direction of these organizations need free and safe access to warm waters that Iran provides it.
- C.** Play multi dimension role to make balance between west and east direction according to its 'not west not east' idea of foreign policy in line with its Islamic constitution. This is compatible with Iran's independent foreign policy. Iran is interesting to play more affective role in Middle East and especially with Muslim countries to make a non-atomic region.

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**ИРАН КАК ГЕОПОЛИТИЧЕСКИЙ АКТОР**

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Представлен феноменологический анализ статуса Ирана как поднимающейся региональной державы и значимого актора в регионе Большого Ближнего Востока. Актуальность такого подхода определяется тем, что Иран является осевым государством не только в регионе Большого Ближнего Востока, но и среди шиитских исламских стран.

В рамках политико-географического подхода дан SWOT-анализ преимуществ и угроз, актуальных для Ирана как геополитического актора. К числу первых относятся размеры и положение, население, природные ресурсы, развитие науки и технологии и транспортных сетей; в числе вторых названы:

- наркотрафик из Афганистана в Иран,
- армяно-азербайджанский вооруженный конфликт и в целом положение вокруг Нагорного Карабаха,

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- рост сепаратистских настроений в соседних с Ираном государствах,
- усиление автономии Курдистана и, как следствие, рост вероятности формирования независимого курдского государства,
- рост сепаратистских настроений внутри самого Ирана, особенно среди его тюркоязычного населения, в первую очередь азербайджанцев, в том числе в форме пан-азербайджанизма как разновидности пан-тюркизма,
- рост напряженности в Белуджистане,
- «инфильтрационное» давление на пограничное пространство Ирана со стороны Афганистана — как со стороны террористических организаций, так и потоков беженцев и нелегальных мигрантов,
- деградация государственной власти Ирака как в результате террористических атак, так и шиитско-суннитских столкновений,
- нестабильность Пакистана и распространение там как террористических организаций, так и конфликта шиитов и суннитов.

Утверждая, что политическая стабильность в регионе невозможна без признания за Ираном статуса геополитического актора, автор делает вывод о том, что в условиях борьбы за лидерство в исламском мире четырех крупнейших исламских государств — Ирана, Турции, Египта и Саудовской Аравии — для достижения желаемой победы Ирану потребуются значительные усилия на следующих направлениях:

1. сотрудничество с Западом, особенно с ЕС, для участия в европейском энергетическом рынке, прежде всего, как экспортера природного газа в страны Евросоюза. Это предполагает как прямые иностранные (западные) инвестиции, так и новые технологии для добычи и переработки, а также строительства трубопровода. Данное направление требует нескольких лет активности в указанной сфере, принимая также во внимание монополию России в качестве реального конкурента. Улучшение отношений с Западом здесь предполагает установление близких политических, экономических и торговых отношений;
2. изменение вектора Ирана в отношении Востока и взаимодействие с Китаем и Россией, включая выбор возможности присоединения к инициативе президента КНР («Один пояс — один путь»), Евразийскому Экономическому Союзу (ЕАЭС), Шанхайской организации сотрудничества (ШОС). С учетом того, что две эти организации в определенном смысле могут выступать в качестве соперников, Иран сможет играть ключевую и даже связующую роль для ШОС и ЕАЭС на Ближнем Востоке, а также обеспечить обеим этим организациям столь необходимый им свободный и безопасный доступ к Индийскому океану на юге;
3. реализация многовекторной политики, направленной на установление баланса между западным и восточным направлениями в соответствии с характерной для Ирана внешнеполитической концепцией «ни запад, ни восток» в духе его исламской конституции и независимой внешней политики. Иран заинтересован в своей более значительной роли на Ближнем Востоке, особенно среди мусульманских стран, для превращения региона в зону, свободную от ядерного оружия.

**Ключевые слова:** Иран; Большой Ближний Восток; геополитический актор; лидерство в исламском мире; поднимающаяся региональная держава.

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