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CHAPTER 18

HOW THE ORGANIZATION OF TURKIC STATES SHAPES IRAN'S PERCEPTIONS OF TÜRKIYE AND AZERBAIJAN

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Abstract

In recent years, the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) has emerged as a significant regional framework through which Türkiye and Azerbaijan have deepened their bilateral cooperation and expanded their strategic influence across the Turkic world. For Iran, however, the OTS remains a source of persistent unease. Although Tehran's relations with both Ankara and Baku are multilayered, ongoing frictions and lingering suspicions toward the organization –largely due to the central roles of Türkiye and Azerbaijan– continue to strain these ties. Despite the absence of a coherent policy toward the OTS, Iran perceives it as a potential constraint on its regional strategy in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Therefore, this chapter examines how the OTS shapes Iran's perceptions of Türkiye and Azerbaijan, emphasizing both the geopolitical and domestic dimensions of Tehran's response, as well as its efforts to contain the organization's influence while preserving independent bilateral relations with each of these states.

Keywords

Iran, Türkiye, Azerbaijan, The Organization of Turkic States, Zangezur Corridor

Introduction

As Iran shares strategically important borders with both Türkiye and Azerbaijan, its relations with these two neighbors are shaped by distinct geopolitical positions and differing economic structures. These divergences have influenced the volume of bilateral trade and the geopolitical priorities of each country. However, at various junctures Iran perceived –and still perceives– Türkiye, and Azerbaijan alongside the U.S. and even Israel– as components of an overlapping regional bloc.

A key factor shaping the dynamics between Iran and its two neighbors is the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), whose members include –alongside Türkiye and Azerbaijan– Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Iran's view of this organization is largely framed through a geopolitical risk lens. This perception has intensified following the emergence –in the aftermath of the Second Karabakh War between 27 September and 10 November 2020– of the debates around Zangezur Corridor, which is expected to link Central Asia through the Türkiye-Nakhchivan-Azerbaijan route and the Caspian Sea.

Following the war, Iran's engagement with Türkiye in the South Caucasus has shifted markedly, resulting in a relative erosion of Tehran's influence compared to its long-standing rival. (Azizi & Isachenko, 2023). Consequently, “The Russia-mediated post-war agreements between Baku and Yerevan marked a shift away from the previously Russia-dominated regional order” which led to “a more multi-polar landscape, where the Türkiye- Azerbaijan axis plays an increasingly pivotal role, challenging the longstanding status quo that Iran had enjoyed for years” (Azizi & Isachenko, 2023). Also, the corridor has amplified Tehran's suspicions regarding both the intentions of Türkiye and Azerbaijan and the potential strategic implications of the OTS in reshaping regional connectivity and power balances.

Also, written in autumn 2025, this analysis reflects a period when the security anxieties triggered by the Israeli and U.S. attacks between June 12 and 24 had deepened Iran's sense of vulnerability and strategic exposure. Tehran's immediate focus is on averting a second round of hostilities and reopening a negotiation channel with Washington. Over the years, in an effort to mitigate external pressure and strengthen its geopolitical standing within emerging multilateral frameworks, Iran has pursued membership in major non-Western organizations –joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in July 2023 and BRICS in January 2024. Yet, given the absence of a defense dimension in these bodies, Tehran continues to perceive itself as surrounded by hostile blocs, including NATO and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Within this broader security outlook, Iran views the growing influence of the OTS through a similar prism of strategic risk.

Thus, Iran's perspective on the OTS remains markedly cautious. While Tehran acknowledges the organization's expanding visibility and influence, it has yet to articulate a coherent policy or definitive position regarding its long-term geopolitical implications. Nonetheless, several indicators shed light on how Iranian policymakers and analysts perceive the OTS's evolving regional and global role –particularly in relation to Türkiye and Azerbaijan, whose leadership within the organization places them at the center of Tehran's strategic scrutiny.

However, before proceeding, it is useful to first examine separately Tehran's broader approach toward Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Central Asia, since understanding this strategic context is essential for assessing the institutional impact of the OTS on Iran's view of Türkiye and Azerbaijan.

1. Iran-Türkiye Relations

Beyond the conventional economic and political dimensions, several structural factors have shaped the trajectory of the relations between Iran and Türkiye at the strategic level. Foremost among these is the latter's membership in NATO and its relations with the U.S. From Tehran's standpoint, Ankara's alignment with NATO's security framework has long constrained the depth of bilateral cooperation in the security realm.

Also, a series of turning points in the twenty-first century has periodically disrupted the Türkiye-Iran relations. The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, the internationalization of Iran's nuclear program through the involvement of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) around the same period, the Arab Spring, and most recently, the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria in December 2024, have all left profound imprints on bilateral ties.

As far as the Middle East is concerned, the post-Saddam realignment of power in Iraq, which shifted the balance in favor of Shi'a political forces, enabled Iran to expand its influence both through sectarian networks and economic penetration—an outcome that significantly affected the regional equilibrium between Tehran and Ankara. Similarly, the IAEA's first resolution of 12 September 2003, expressing concern over Iran's nuclear activities, intensified anxieties about nuclear proliferation across the Middle East. Türkiye, while emphasizing a diplomatic resolution to the emerging crisis, insisted that Iran's nuclear program remain within the bounds of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT).

The Syrian civil war, which erupted in March 2011, represented another major fault line. The two countries found themselves on opposing sides (Afacan, 2021, p. 240). For Türkiye, Syria constituted a direct national security concern due to its long-shared border and the presence of Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)-affiliated groups while for Iran the Assad regime was a cornerstone of its "axis of resistance." The Syrian revolution of 8 December 2024, which culminated in the fall of Assad, thus marked a fundamental shift in the regional balance of power—with immediate repercussions for both Ankara and Tehran.

The Second Karabakh War likewise emerged as a critical stress test for bilateral relations. From the outset of hostilities, Iran voiced concern over the potential for a volatile and unpredictable transformation of the South Caucasus status quo, viewing Türkiye's expanding footprint in the region as fundamentally at odds with its own interests. Following the November 10, 2020, ceasefire agreement between Baku and Yerevan, Tehran regarded efforts to establish a land corridor connecting Azerbaijan to its Nakhchivan exclave—a project strongly supported by Türkiye—as a major geopolitical risk. In its official discourse, Iran consistently condemned the pursuit of success through war and urged all parties to return to the path of diplomacy. In an interview with *Kayhan* newspaper on 5 October, the Supreme Leader's senior advisor, Ali Akbar Velayati, referred to Karabakh as "occupied territory," yet cautioned that its liberation should not come "at the cost of human blood" (Has et al., 2020, p. 17-18).

Iran's unease with the new status quo in the region primarily stemmed from the increasingly close and strategic relations between Ankara and Baku. This dynamic makes it necessary to provide an overview of Iran-Azerbaijan relations. The following section therefore examines—albeit briefly—the main dynamics shaping the interaction between the two countries.

2. Iran-Azerbaijan Relations

The South Caucasus holds enduring strategic significance for the Islamic Republic of Iran, shaped by a combination of geography, history, and geoeconomics. Its importance can be summarized along the following lines (Dehghani-Firoozabadi, 2010, p. 209):

- i. Geostrategic adjacency: The South Caucasus lies directly along Iran's northern frontier, making it a core element of Tehran's "neighborhood policy" as codified in the Iranian Constitution. Its proximity to the Caspian Sea—a basin of both strategic and resource value—further enhances the region's importance.
- ii. Geopolitical and geoeconomic relevance: The Caucasus occupies a pivotal position along energy transit routes linking the Caspian basin to Europe and global markets. This dual significance—resource and route—has historically drawn the attention of major international powers and intensified competition in the region.
- iii. Shared borders and resources: Iran borders both Azerbaijan and Armenia, while also sharing Caspian littoral status with energy-rich states. This intersection of land and sea borders gives Iran direct exposure to the regional balance of power and energy geopolitics.

iv. Historical and civilizational depth: Iran views the South Caucasus through a civilizational lens, emphasizing shared historical, linguistic, and cultural linkages. The territories of modern-day Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia were once integrated into the Iranian imperial sphere and remain, in Tehran's view, part of its broader civilizational basin.

v. Transit and connectivity: The region functions as a vital corridor for Iran's ambitions to serve as a bridge between the Caspian basin and European energy markets. Tehran presents itself as the shortest, most cost-effective route for transporting Caspian hydrocarbons to external markets.

vi. Converging interests: Iran and the South Caucasus states share overlapping geopolitical and geoeconomic interests, creating potential –though unrealized– space for cooperation. Tehran's strategic calculus rests on maintaining influence in this arena to balance external powers and preserve its northern frontier stability.

Added to these considerations are the perceived risks associated with NATO's eastward expansion, a concern shared by both Iran and Russia. From Tehran's perspective, Moscow's opposition to NATO's enlargement resonates with its own apprehension about the encroachment of Western military and political influence into the post-Soviet space. Both countries advocate for regional problem-solving through regional mechanisms, without the involvement of non-regional actors.

Within this framework, Azerbaijan occupies a particularly sensitive position. Its strategic geography, demographic weight, and potential economic power make it the pivotal state of the South Caucasus. Moreover, the presence of millions of ethnic Turks within Iran's borders –a population larger than that of the Republic of Azerbaijan itself– imbues bilateral relations with a profound domestic dimension. Iranian policymakers have long feared that developments in Azerbaijan could reverberate internally, shaping ethnic sentiment and political dynamics within Iran. Consequently, Tehran accords exceptional importance to the Azerbaijani question, viewing it not merely as a foreign-policy matter but as a core issue of national cohesion and security (Afacan, 2022, p. 331).

Iran's anxieties regarding the U.S.-NATO-Israel axis are evident across nearly every dimension of its regional outlook. At critical junctures –most notably during the above mentioned twelve-day conflict with Israel– Tehran accused Israel of launching attacks via Azerbaijani territory, prompting officials in Baku to issue high-level assurances that such actions would not be permitted. Iranian officials, however, have long underscored this issue, tracing their concerns back to the Second Karabakh War, during which Tehran repeatedly warned of Israeli entrenchment in the South Caucasus. An academic analysis published after the war captured this sentiment succinctly: "Iran's national interests in the region are not being safeguarded, and the growing presence of terrorists, neo-Ottomanists, and Israelis threatens to undermine our future security" (Ekhbari, 2020, p. 27).

Also, in the aftermath of the Iran-Israel conflict, Ebrahim Azizi, a member of the Iranian Parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Commission, reiterated these concerns by claiming that Iranian border guards had observed Israeli drones infiltrating Iranian airspace from Azerbaijani territory (Asr-e Iran, 2025a).

Although Iran-Azerbaijan relations have improved considerably in recent months, Tehran's concerns regarding Azerbaijan also derive from its geostrategic position as a critical link between Türkiye and Central Asia. To better grasp this dimension, it is essential to recall Iran's broader relations with the Central Asian republics by highlighting the key patterns, constraints, and strategic considerations that shape Tehran's regional posture.

3. Iran's Relations with Central Asia

Unlike its relations with Türkiye and Azerbaijan, Iran's engagement with the Central Asian Turkic republics is largely devoid of comparable security anxieties. This relative insulation from threat perceptions has

helped temper Tehran's apprehensions toward the OTS. In this context, Iran approaches Central Asia primarily through a lens of economic connectivity, cultural affinity, and pragmatic diplomacy, rather than security competition.

Iran's perspective toward Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan— as the other three members of the OTS— is shaped not only by its bilateral relations with each of these countries but also by the broader geopolitical configuration of Central Asia. In other words, several shared structural features collectively inform Tehran's overarching approach to the region (Afacan, 2021a, p. 168).

The first is the predominantly Muslim composition of these societies, which has encouraged Iran to pursue an active policy of cultural and religious diplomacy aimed at building affinities through shared civilizational identity. The second is their Soviet legacy and enduring strategic ties with Russia. Given the depth of Tehran's relationship with Moscow, the "Russia factor" remains a stabilizing and constraining influence on Iran's conduct in the region.

A third determinant is the China factor. Central Asia and the South Caucasus represent a critical land bridge in Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—the modern reimagining of the Silk Road designed to connect East Asia with European markets. With Kazakhstan sharing China's longest western border and Kyrgyzstan also abutting Chinese territory, the region, along with Iran, forms the "belt" segment of the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor (Yellinek, 2020).

The fourth is Türkiye's growing influence—the so-called "pan-Turkism factor." Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, both Ankara and Tehran—two major Muslim powers—have competed for political, economic, and cultural influence across the region. This rivalry has frequently prompted Iran to adopt reactive or defensive policies, seeking to counterbalance Türkiye's assertive outreach.

Together, these dynamics underscore both the distinctive character and strategic significance of Iran's relations with the Central Asian Turkic republics—relations often overshadowed by Tehran's preoccupation with the Middle East and its relations with the West. Examining Iran's policies toward these states through the four lenses outlined above provides valuable insight into why its Central Asian strategy diverges markedly from its approaches in other geopolitical arenas.

Equally important, they help explain why Tehran perceives the OTS as a comparatively limited threat. Iran views the Central Asian members of the OTS as pursuing national priorities and external alignments distinct from those of Türkiye and Azerbaijan, whose agendas Tehran regards as more overtly competitive. In Iran's assessment—largely, though not entirely, justified—these internal differences within the OTS act as a natural counterbalance, tempering the organization's collective strategic coherence and reducing its potential to evolve into a unified bloc against Iranian interests.

As a guiding principle, Iran neither supports nor considers feasible any genuine integration between Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and the Central Asian republics, viewing such a formation as deliberately detrimental to its regional and global posture. Tehran perceives the political, economic, and security alignment of these states—particularly under the umbrella of the OTS— as a potential mechanism to circumscribe Iran's strategic depth and weaken its influence across the broader Eurasian landscape.

Iran plays a pivotal role in regional transit, serving as a vital corridor connecting Central Asia and Caspian littoral states to global markets. According to Iranian customs data, in 2024, approximately 21.9 million tons of goods transited Iranian territory—representing a 22.5 percent increase over the previous year (Asr-e Iran, 2025b). As such, although Iran's outlook on the OTS is shaped primarily by geopolitical anxieties, geoeconomic considerations play an increasingly prominent role.

The following section examines Iran's positioning toward the OTS and evaluates how this position influences Tehran's broader relationships with Türkiye and Azerbaijan.

4. The OTS Factor: Concerns and Constraints Through Iran's Lens

Iran's perspective on the OTS can be assessed along two principal axes: its broader foreign-policy orientation and its post-conflict recalibration. In the aftermath of the confrontation with Israel, Tehran – acutely aware of the risks of international isolation and its regional reverberations– has signaled a desire to deepen bilateral cooperation with neighboring states and to promote regional integration mechanisms. These shifts are likely to influence not only Iran's relations with its Gulf Arab neighbors but, more crucially, its interactions with Türkiye and Azerbaijan, whose prominent position within the OTS make them focal points of Iranian scrutiny.

Yet these signals have not yet materialized into concrete policy, largely because two major dynamics remain unresolved. First, Tehran is still seeking avenues to reopen negotiations with the U.S. and secure a new agreement, as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) –signed in July 2015 and implemented in January 2016– has become effectively defunct. Second, the trajectory of Iran's new regional policy will hinge on the responses of regional actors to its broader diplomatic overtures.

Accordingly, the following section examines how the OTS has been discussed within Iran at the analytical –and, to a lesser extent, political– level, particularly in relation to Türkiye and Azerbaijan.

When the organization was first established in October 2009 as the Cooperation Council of Turkic-Speaking States, Iran offered no explicit reaction –largely due to a combination of domestic and external considerations. First, only a few months before the establishment of the OTS, Iran was engulfed in the Green Movement –the mass protests that erupted following Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's disputed re-election on June 12, 2009, against reformist challenger Mir Hossein Mousavi. The movement represented perhaps the most serious post-revolutionary challenge to the Islamic Republic's legitimacy and preoccupied the state's political and security apparatus throughout that year.

Externally, Iran was simultaneously confronted with security instability along its borders. On April 23, 2009, a border clash occurred between Iranian and Afghan guards in Nimroz Province, resulting in the death of at least one Iranian border guard and the capture of another. This incident reflected the volatile security environment surrounding Iran at the time –marked by persistent cross-border insurgency, drug trafficking, and instability in peripheral regions such as Sistan and Balochistan. Compounding these challenges was the intensifying international sanctions regime that began tightening around Iran in the same period, further constraining Tehran's diplomatic flexibility until the JCPOA was finally signed.

However, as time passed, Iranian media and analytical outlets began to address the OTS with increasing frequency though these were primarily commentaries and policy analyses, not official statements issued by the Iranian state.

Broadly speaking, two interpretive strands emerged within Iran. The first viewed the OTS as fundamentally contrary to Iran's geopolitical interests, perceiving it as a potential vehicle for Turkish regional influence and an implicit challenge to Iran's cultural and strategic space. The second, more pragmatic view, suggested that Iran should seek membership or structured engagement with the OTS to neutralize potential risks and prevent its institutional consolidation from occurring in isolation from Iranian influence.

A clear reflection of these debates appears in a book published in 2023 under the title *Sāzmān-e Dowlat-hā-ye Tork* (The Organization of Turkic States) –the only Persian-language monograph exclusively dedicated to the subject. It is worth noting that Iran's official news agency, IRNA, offered detailed coverage of the book (Naderi, 2024).

The authors explicitly articulated their position on the OTS by stating that ignoring this organization would be counterproductive to Iran's role in the emerging regional order:

Iranians must therefore adopt either a constructive or a confrontational approach, taking into account national interests and the realities of both domestic and foreign policy... The European Union and the United States, as two key actors, welcome the expansion of this organization as a means of containing China and Russia, while the Zionist [Israeli] regime and the [Arabian] Gulf Cooperation Council each pursue their own distinct interests in its growth. (Afrasyab et al., 2022, p. 23)

Thus, accordingly joining the OTS would result in “the elimination of the anti-Iranian nature” of this institution” (Afrasyab et al., 2022, p. 19-20).

Apparently, the assumption that the OTS would almost inevitably act against Iran’s interests has emerged more as an instinctive reflex than as a conclusion grounded in concrete developments. Although this perception persists within certain Iranian circles, recent dynamics among OTS members have, from Tehran’s standpoint, underscored the limits of geopolitical coordination within the organization. For example, Iran interpreted the outcomes of the EU-Central Asia Summit held in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, on April 3-4, 2025, as clear evidence of divergence among the member states.

At the summit, three full members –Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan– along with observer Turkmenistan, formally recognized the Greek Cypriot administration, breaking with Türkiye’s longstanding diplomatic position on the Cyprus question. This move dealt a serious blow to Ankara’s efforts to gain wider international recognition for the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC).

Iranian media outlets quickly seized on the episode, portraying it as both evidence of Türkiye’s “occupation” of Cyprus and a turning point that exposed the limitations of the OTS as a geopolitical bloc:

Despite this, it is expected that this organization will continue to exist. However, from now on, political and diplomatic coordination among its members will face serious difficulties. It is very likely that member states will refrain from signing statements with political or geopolitical content, preferring instead to focus on cultural and economic cooperation, which were among the organization’s original objectives. (Institute Tehran, 2025)

Overall, the Samarkand developments were widely interpreted in Iranian analysis (e.g., Mashregh News, 2025) as evidence that OTS members are unlikely to align behind Ankara on contentious sovereignty issues –underscoring Tehran’s belief that the organization’s internal divisions inherently constrain its strategic coherence.

Still, Iran’s geostrategic concerns regarding the OTS primarily stem from Ankara’s perceived ambitions to assert regional dominance across the Caucasus and Central Asia. In recent years, such divergent and often conflated concepts as *neo-Ottomanism* and *pan-Turanism* have been widely invoked in Iran when describing Türkiye’s foreign policy– *neo-Ottomanism* largely in reference to its actions in the Middle East, and *pan-Turanism* in connection with its outreach to Central Asia. It is worth including a relatively long excerpt from the above-mentioned book, as it offers a revealing –if somewhat confused– illustration of how this rhetoric operates:

“In recent years, Türkiye has been riding the wave of Turkism across the Caucasus, Transcaucasia, and Central Asia, positioning itself as the leading advocate of a Turkish *ummah* and claiming the role of Umm al-Qurā [literally “Mother of All Villages,” a Qur’anic term denoting Mecca as the spiritual center of Islam– for Turks worldwide]. Through this ideological framework, Ankara has managed to overcome internal contradictions and external obstacles among Turks worldwide, emerging as a pioneer across political, economic, cultural, and religious spheres. Accordingly, the Islamic Republic of Iran, regardless of its historical and cultural affinities with these countries, should leverage the “Turkishness” of a significant segment of its population and enter the union of the Turkic world.

If this were to occur, first, Iran would become the second most influential member in demographic terms and would naturally reap substantial benefits across economic, cultural, and political domains. Second, it

would gain access to the region's strategic and geographic resources and advantages. Third, it would form one side of a power triangle –alongside Russia and Türkiye– in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Fourth, it would become insulated from potential threats and dangers emanating from these regions (Afrasyab et al., 2022, p. 21-22).

The book also highlights the risks that the Organization of Turkic States poses not only for Iran but also for China and Russia:

The overt and covert ambitions of this organization pose extensive cultural, economic, political, and security risks to other states –including Iran, Russia, and China– necessitating coordinated responses to contain the threat. The OTS, serving as a Western instrument in the geopolitical rivalry led by the United States against Russia and China, has the potential to tilt the balance of power in favor of the West over the medium to long term. (Afrasyab et al., 2022, p. 83).

Chinese suspicion toward the OTS is also echoed in other analyses (Pirani, 2024). Pirani also argues that that Moscow –long intent on keeping regional states within its orbit through a network of alliances and institutions– views the OTS as “a new and potentially disruptive challenge to its regional ambitions” (Pirani, 2024).

The same book further contends that Washington now regards Türkiye as a balancing actor in Asia and is “inclined to create threats and drain the strategic energy of Moscow, Beijing, and Tehran” by empowering organizations such as the OTS (Afrasyab et al., 2022, p. 102).

The Israeli factor is also often highlighted in references to the potential and actual security risks posed by the OTS against Iran:

Undoubtedly, strengthening Israel's ties with the Central Asian states will be relatively easy, given that they form a geographic arc stretching from Iran's northwest to its northeast. Creating a Turkish power in Eurasia is Azerbaijan's priority because, like Israel, it currently has complex and tense relations with Iran. In this context, the OTS is portrayed as part of a broader effort, coordinated with the Gulf Arab states led by Saudi Arabia, to encircle Iran and curtail its regional influence. The emerging alignment thus places Türkiye and its Turkic partners along Iran's northern frontier, while the Gulf states constrain its southern flank.

It should be taken into account that Israel supports all these developments against Tehran and places its advanced military technologies at the disposal of many of Iran's rivals. Given the geographical proximity and the fact that some of the countries of this organization border Iran, this will create a special advantage for Israel to be able to have a strong presence on Iran's borders. With the improvement of Israel's relations with the Persian Gulf countries and the Turkic world, Iran will be pressured on two fronts and Iran's influence in the region will decrease. (Afrasyab et al., 2022, p. 103-104).

Conclusion

Tehran has yet to articulate a coherent strategy toward the OTS, although its prevailing attitude remains distinctly cautious –if not overtly negative– toward the organization. Most recently, the Twelfth Summit of the OTS was held on 7 October 2025 in Gabala, Azerbaijan, under the theme “Regional Peace and Security,” where key foreign policy and security issues were discussed. Iranian media outlets devoted considerable attention to the summit and its outcomes.

For instance, the semi-official Tasnim News Agency reported on the event under the headline “The Organization of Turkic States: Türkiye's Expectations and the Contradictions of Regional Reality” It argued that, despite leveraging the OTS as a diplomatic tool, Türkiye failed to achieve its objectives regarding several strategic issues. It concluded that, despite Ankara's repeated emphasis on enhancing the regional role of the OTS, “there seems to be a considerable gap between Ankara's expectations and the organization's actual capabilities”. Furthermore, it noted that “the principal Achilles' heel of the Organization of Turkic

States lies in its lack of substantive economic orientation and its disproportionate emphasis on identity and ethnic narratives –an emphasis largely driven by Türkiye as a political instrument rather than a cohesive regional strategy” (Tasnim, 2025).

Overall, Iran’s concerns about the OTS operate on three interconnected levels. First, at the geopolitical level, Tehran views Türkiye’s leadership within the OTS as an extension of Ankara’s alleged neo-Ottoman and pan-Turan ambitions potentially undermining Iran’s role as a Eurasian pivot. In this regard, the incorporation of Azerbaijan as a core member of this framework further heightens Iran’s unease, as it brings the organization’s activities directly to its northern frontier. Second, at the ideological level, the organization’s Turkic identity narrative is seen as a rival to Iran’s universalist Islamic discourse and as a possible source of domestic unease given its large Turkish-speaking population. Third, at the security level, Iran fears that the OTS could serve as a conduit for Israeli and Western influence along its northern frontier.

At a deeper level, Iran’s concerns about the OTS are inseparable from its broader strategic predicament. Since the early 2000s, Tehran has faced what it perceives as a tightening web of rival regional alignments –from NATO in the west to the Gulf Cooperation Council in the south. In this context, the OTS appears as yet another layer of geopolitical constraint, potentially bridging the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Turkic-speaking regions into a structure that could marginalize Iran both economically and strategically. While the organization’s current agenda emphasizes connectivity and cultural cooperation, Iranian analysts often interpret these ostensibly benign activities as vehicles for embedding Türkiye’s soft power and for diffusing ideological narratives that challenge Iran’s Islamic-revolutionary identity. In this sense, the OTS embodies a type of normative competition that Tehran finds particularly disquieting: one rooted not in overt hostility but in the subtle projection of an alternative regional order centered on ethnic and linguistic solidarity rather than religious or revolutionary principles.

Domestically, the OTS question resonates with Iran’s internal ethnic and linguistic diversity, particularly the presence of a large Turkish-speaking population concentrated in the northwest. Although Tehran has historically maintained a delicate balance between cultural recognition and political control, the growing prominence of Turkic identity in regional politics complicates this equilibrium. Iranian commentators frequently warn that the symbolic appeal of pan-Turkism –revived under the OTS umbrella– could reverberate within Iran’s borders, potentially fueling separatist sentiment or identity-based activism. While such fears may be exaggerated, they nonetheless show the extent to which Iran’s external security concerns are intertwined with its internal sociopolitical cohesion. Consequently, Tehran’s cautious and often defensive rhetoric toward the OTS also functions as a domestic signaling tool, aimed at asserting the primacy of the state in managing cross-border cultural affinities.

However, debates within Iran also suggest that, on strategic matters, the divergent geopolitical priorities of the OTS member states will inevitably constrain the organization’s overall influence –an outcome reflected in the aforementioned positions of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan regarding the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus.

Also, equally importantly, from the same perspective, the effectiveness and future trajectory of the OTS are arguably also constrained by the cautious positions of China and Russia, both of which view the organization as a potential challenge to their influence in Eurasia. Moscow perceives it as an encroachment on its traditional sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space, while Beijing regards the Turkic framework as a latent competitor to its Belt and Road Initiative and to its management of Turkic identity issues in Xinjiang. For Tehran, this great-power ambivalence offers a degree of reassurance: as long as Moscow and Beijing resist the formation of alternative regional alignments, Iran faces less pressure from a consolidated Turkic front.

In conclusion, from Iran’s perspective, the OTS –though not constituting a direct or existential threat to Tehran– nonetheless symbolizes a regional transformation that the Islamic Republic cannot easily overlook, particularly in the context of its relations with Ankara and Baku. For the moment, Iran’s response remains

marked by ambivalence, oscillating between caution, criticism, and measured pragmatism. Its future posture will likely hinge on two key variables: the extent to which Türkiye and Azerbaijan succeed in transforming the OTS into a genuinely functional geopolitical instrument, and Iran's own ability to redefine its regional identity beyond the enduring binaries of resistance and rivalry.

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