

# Iran: A Bridge Among Continents

by Hussein Askary

Iran is one of the most active nations in Asia in building new national infrastructure projects of continental and transcontinental significance. Since the inauguration of the Mashhad-Sarakhs (Turkmenistan) railway in 1996 by then-President Hashemi Rafsanjani, Iran became connected to China, and the ancient Silk Road was revived. Two years later, Iran finished its connection to the northwest, to Turkey, and the Silk road was connected to Europe. In 2001, the Mashhad-Bafq-Bandar Abbas line was completed, connecting landlocked Central Asia to the Persian Gulf. Iran also completed the Bafq-Kerman-Zahedan railway to Pakistan, connecting Iran to the Indian subcontinent.

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Iran is currently building a connection to the Indian Ocean at the Chabahar port on the Arabian Sea, and a railway that goes north from there to Mashhad and Central Asia. Together with the two other connections to the Caucasus, one through Astara (Azerbaijan) and one to Jolfa (Armenia), the South-North-Corridor connecting India, Iran, and Russia will be accomplished, reducing the time for cargo shipments from India or Eastern Africa, for example, to Northern Europe, from three weeks by sea to one week by land. Iran is also building railways to Herat in Afghanistan, to Khanaqin in Iraq, and to Basrah in Iraq.

Iran now has gas pipelines to Turkey and Pakistan (inaugurated on March 11), and in the next year it will have them to Iraq and to Syria on the Mediterranean Sea (if not sabotaged by the U.S.-British-Saudi-backed religious wars), and even to Jordan on the Red Sea.

With all these connections, the different Iranian governments have pursued a policy of national, regional, and transcontinental economic integration,

making Iran indispensable to the region and the world economically. It is complete foolishness for the Arab countries not to work with Iran to secure their economic security. Just to take one example, the massive transshipment activities in the ports of Dubai are now almost completely dependent on trade with Iran and secondly with Iraq.

In addition to being a bridge to other markets, Iran, with its 76 million population (mostly young) is one of the largest markets in the region for both consumer and capital goods. It has the world's fourth largest oil reserves and second-largest natural gas reserves. But these are underdeveloped, due to the sanctions imposed on Iran.

The potential, as shown in the developments around Bandar Abbas and Hormozgan Province since the building of the Mashhad-Bafq-Bandar Abbas railroad, is so great in this whole region, that it is economic suicide for regional and global economic powers to exclude Iran, and besiege it with sanctions.