Published: April 19, 2022
Last Updated: April 21, 2022

KOREA II. MODERN RELATIONS

INTRODUCTION

The Korean-Iranian relationship has its own peculiar attributes, which largely differ from various patterns of interactions and alignment that have taken place between these nations and some of their foreign partners in different parts of the world. One differentiating element of the Korea-Iran connections is that both North and South Korea succeed in engaging their Iranian counterparts, although the scope and level of the Korean Peninsula-Iran engagement are not equally distributed between North and South Korea. North Koreans associate with Iranians more politically and militarily, while their surreptitious and often contentious connections to Iran appear to be rather miscellaneous and commonly fraught with twists and turns. Quite contrary to such hard politics played by North Koreans, however, South Koreans benefit more from their soft approach toward Iranians through economic channels and cultural means (Davidson, p. 52). Political ideology, even when it sometimes stems from a third party, plays a pivotal role in the Pyongyang-Tehran affiliation, but such a key factor is usually absent in Seoul-Tehran interactions. South Korea's relationship with Iran has its own peculiar politics, but this principle factor is normally and stubbornly played down by every stakeholder in favor of other less contentious areas in economics, finance, technology, and culture.

A second important characteristic of the Korea–Iran relationship is that their interactions, at least in contemporary times, have been almost persistent and incremental since the 1950s, both during the final decades of the Pahlavi dynasty and in the follow-up establishment of the Islamic Republic. This is partly because stakes have been rather high in the two contrasting periods. Under the Pahlavi monarchy, for instance, the Iranian government was once contemplating to engage directly and militarily in a major international conflict (the Korean War) over the Korean cause, while the Iran-North Korea nexus of ostensibly close partnership and attachment under the Islamic Republic was never truly innocuous and devoid of relevant costs in one way or another (ROK's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1996). And there has been logically and justifiably a flurry of social and economic grievances among the Iranians in recent years with regard to South Korea's encroachment upon their markets and national products, but friendly Pyongyang-Tehran connections also made many Iranians queasy about various potential costs of such dubious affinity for their overall national interests.

A third, but not final, feature of the association between Koreans and Iranians is that in many ways both parties surprisingly have more differences than shared interests. Of course, both the Iranian plateau and the Korean Peninsula are inescapably located in the greater Asian continent, but short of that there is not much commonality between the two sides. In fact, the riddle of the Korea-Iran affiliation in contemporary history becomes more compelling when one realizes that they managed to forge close connections in various areas without sharing much in common politically, economically, and culturally. Koreans, from both sides of the demilitarized zone, have built their own socio-political systems as well as techno-economic structures, which are significantly different from those found in Iran. Such differences and disparity, however, have not forestalled the two sides from engaging in high-level interactions. Nor have those obvious dissimilarities really dissuaded some other stakeholders to put Iranians and Koreans in certain categories and give them identical labels (Cronin).

DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS

South Korea and Iran. In contemporary history, the Koreans took some early steps to develop the initial diplomatic contacts with Iran. The initiatives included the dispatch of a good-will mission by the first president of the Republic of Korea, Syngman Rhee, to some 10 countries in the Middle East and North Africa from 15 April to 24 June 1957. Among all countries that the good-

will mission visited, Iran was surprisingly the only one that had already recognized the Republic of Korea. South Korea subsequently managed to establish official diplomatic relations with Iran in October 1962, after several rounds of bilateral negotiations between the two countries. In spite of such initial steps, however, the East Asian nation opened its Tehran embassy in April 1967. Iran took a more lackadaisical approach to dispatching an envoy, appointing its Tokyo ambassador, Nur-al-Din Kiā, as an accredited ambassador to Seoul only in 1968 and setting up its embassy in the South Korean capital in April 1975. During that period, Iran managed its Korean affairs through its Tokyo embassy, appointing the ambassador simultaneously as *chargé d'affaires* to handle Tehran's political and economic relations with Seoul in addition to those related to Japan (*Korea Times*, 26 April 1972, p. 1).

As far as alliance politics is concerned, South Korea was able to develop stronger political ties and more considerable economic relations with Iran under the Pahlavi monarchy in the 1960s and especially in the 1970s (Buss, p. 82). In addition to its early recognition of the Republic of Korea and its sympathy toward the people of South Korea upon the outbreak of the Korean War, the Iranian government often threw its unequivocal support behind Seoul in major international debates involving the Korean Cause, especially at United Nations meetings. For instance, in the 17th United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in 1962, Iran, Israel, Jordan, and North Yemen, were the only Middle East countries that supported Seoul. Moreover, in the 18th UNGA meeting in 1963, only Iran and Israel sided with Seoul but no Arab country supported the South Korean position (Wilber, pp. 256-59). By the same token, the Korean government in Seoul often had to reassess its rather ambiguous policy toward Israel in order to curry favor with Arab countries in the Middle East, but such a stumbling block did not bother Seoul's ties to Tehran, neither during the 1960s nor after the first oil shock of 1973.

Iran was even willing to help South Korea escape the quagmire that was the Vietnam War, offering to play a mediating role in order to find a political solution to that internecine conflict which involved a significant number of South Korean soldiers (*Korea Herald*, 27 November 1966, p. 1). To further nurture this kind of Iranian goodwill towards their country and to solidify bilateral relations with Iran, the South Korean government often resorted to a slew of diplomatic and non-political measures at its disposal until the fall of the monarchy in early 1979 (*Korea Times*, 12 July 1978, p. S4). Every South Korean top official, with the exception of the president, visited Iran before

1979; among them were prime ministers, the speaker of the National Assembly, many cabinet ministers (including the head of foreign ministry), and mayors of Korea's largest cities.

On the Iranian side, Moḥammd-Reżā Shah never visited South Korea, but his foreign minister, Ardašir Zāhedi, became the first high-ranking Iranian official to visit the East Asian nation in May 1969, when he also received an honorary doctorate in law from Chung-Ang University in Seoul. Zāhedi was also the first foreign minister from a Middle Eastern country to have ever visited the Republic of Korea up until that time. The South Korean president at the time, Park Chung-hee, conferred on him the "Order of Diplomatic Service Merit, Kwanghwa" during his official visits to Seoul in 1969 (*Korea Herald*, 6 May 1969, p. 4). Such visits to the Republic of Korea by other Iranian cabinet ministers became rather frequent until early 1979 when the Pahlavi monarchy was replaced by the Islamic Republic..

The establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979 after the fall of the Pahlavi monarchy, which had been a good friend to South Korea, and the outbreak of an eight-year long bloody Iran-Iraq War (q.v.) in the early 1980s negatively impacted the bilateral political and economic relations between Tehran and Seoul (*Korea Times*, 25 September 1980, p. 2). Political relations between the two countries reduced to *charge d'affaires* from the ambassadorial level and a majority of Korean nationals had to leave Iran. It was the largest diplomatic setback that the East Asian country had ever suffered in the Middle East since its modern encounter with the region in the late 1950s. Bilateral relations between Seoul and Tehran further deteriorated when the Islamic Republic approached North Korea for war requirements, a sudden development that took Seoul by surprise (*Korea Herald*, 1 October 1980, p. 1). It was a deleterious development that would later result in the denigration of Seoul's image among officials of the Islamic Republic, because North Korean diplomats would begin actively working against Seoul's interests in Tehran (*Korea Herald*, 16 October 1980, p. 1).

Meanwhile, the conclusion of the Iran–Iraq War and Iran's embarkation on a national program for reconstruction and economic development paved the way for a rapprochement in diplomatic relations between Seoul and Tehran. It should also be noted that a high-ranking South Korean foreign ministry official had already visited Iran more than a year before to lobby for such a diplomatic breakthrough. An advancement in bilateral relations between the two countries proceeded apace when the deputy foreign minister of Iran,

Jawād Manṣuri, visited Seoul in January 1989 to hold talks with a number of South Korea's top officials, including the prime minister (*Korea Herald*, 26 January 1989, p. 2). In a meeting with the South Korean foreign minister, Ho-joong Choi, the two sides decided to dispatch ambassadors to their respective capitals to run each other's diplomatic missions, both of which had been managed by *chargé d'affaires* since 1981. Moreover, Iran's evolving Eastern-looking foreign policy, pursued roughly from the beginning of the 1990s, played a crucial role in Tehran's ever expanding interactions with East Asian countries such as the Republic of Korea. This policy continued throughout the 1990s and kept increasing thereafter (Azad, 2013).

Since the turn of the century, however, the relationship between Iran and South Korea has undergone considerable development, experiencing both close cooperation in economic areas and challenging issues related to the world of politics. The emergence of daunting new issues in bilateral relations between Tehran and Seoul has been mostly caused by external factors such as the evolving structure of the international system in which South Korea has been pushed to play a role as part of its commitment to the long-term security alliance it has maintained with the United States for many decades (*Yonhap News Agency*, 18 January 2012). In particular, the sanctions against Iran became a rather large problem for the conservative government of President Lee Myung-bak and perhaps the most pressing issue that the Republic of Korea had to face in the Middle East since the Iraq War of 2003. Eventually, the Lee government tried to strike a cautious balance between the Republic of Korea's political alliance with the United States and its ever-increasing interests in Iran, although the policy had its own ramifications for broader Seoul-Tehran ties in one way or another (Azad, 2013).

With the ascendancy of Hassan Rouhani (Ḥasan Ruḥāni) to the Iranian presidency in August 2013, nevertheless, tackling the country's chronic and knotty foreign policy problems, especially the nuclear issue, became a leitmotif of the new government. After a long, drawn-out process of intensive negotiations over some 18 months, Iran and the five-plus-one party (United States, Britain, France, Russia, China, and Germany) issued a document entitled the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in June 2015, according to which Iran could get rid of the relevant international sanctions in exchange for scaling back in its nuclear program (*New York Times*, 18 January 2016, p. A20). But the JCPOA was essentially not only about a lasting settlement of the Iranian nuclear controversy, as the deal had long been predicted by

impartial experts to lead to the reintegration of Iran into the international system, even if gradually and bit by bit. South Koreans were, therefore, very anxious about how to safeguard their interests in Iran when it was moving confidently to mend fences with the West and consequently to allow into the country a slew of new aggressive competitors from almost every part of the world (*Reuters*, 22 August 2015; *Hamšahri*, 29 February 2016, p. 1).

As a consequence, Park Geun-hye became the first South Korean president to pay an official visit to Iran, from 1 to 4 May 2016. Prior to Park's trip to Iran, no Korean top leader, not even a North Korean paramount leader, had gone to Iran. In fact, such a crucial event had not taken place even during the reign of her father, Park Chung-hee, when the Republic of Korea and Iran enjoyed a more propitious environment in their bilateral political relations. For an uninterrupted diplomatic relationship of more than six decades, therefore, too much importance had been attached to Park's tour to Tehran (*Yonhap News Agency*, 4 May 2016). Moreover, the South Korean president also embarked upon such a journey at a crucial time when there was really not much certainty about the prospect of Iran's ongoing yet cautious interactions with a number of influential Western countries. Whether or not the United States had already endorsed Park's Iran visit, explicitly or implicitly, she most probably could not have planned for such an event in the absence of a tacit agreement from the administration of President Barack Obama. After all, a great deal of the cold environment in the Republic of Korea's political ties with Iran since the early 1980s had much to do with Washington's policies toward Tehran (Taylor, p. 137). A key objective of Park's trip was thus to stir up enough enthusiasm and support for a new all-out relationship between Iran and the Republic of Korea in the wake of the Iranian nuclear deal.

North Korea and Iran. Like their South Korean counterparts, the North Koreans first strove to develop a better relationship with Iran along with numerous other connections, favoring Tehran over other countries in the Persian Gulf region. Although Tehran's alliance politics and its main foreign policy pattern during the 1950s and 1960s had curtailed Pyongyang's efforts to develop political ties with Iran, the establishment of a South Korean embassy in Tehran in the second half of the 1960s motivated North Korea more than ever to establish diplomatic ties to this Persian Gulf country. Despite the existence of a small volume of economic exchanges between Iran and North Korea, it still took a few more years before the two countries finally established formal diplomatic relations in April 1973. To guard against any

objections and/or criticisms on the part of the South Korean government (as well as other parties), Iran primarily linked its decision to recognize the regime of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, i.e., North Korea) to the ongoing discussions between the two Koreas at that particular time. The then Iranian foreign minister, ʿAbbās-ʿAli Ḵalʿatbari, clearly hinted at such a correlation by pointing out that "if there were some sort of relationship between the two Koreas, there would be no reasons for Iran not to have relations with North Korea" (ROK's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2003).

Another probable reason for Tehran's recognition of Pyongyang was the fact that Iran had ongoing diplomatic relations with other communist countries, including many Eastern European nations, the Soviet Union, and China; the latter had been recognized by Iran in August 1971. All of these communist nations had close relationships with North Korea and were considered at the time to be Pyongyang's top political allies and trading partners. Moreover, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and its championing of the Korean Cause might have had some impact on the Iranian diplomatic move regarding North Korea. As a matter of fact, Iran was an active member of the NAM right from the start. A series of informal diplomatic initiatives within the movement and the growing influence of North Korea in the NAM, particularly during the early 1970s, likely further convinced the Iranian government to come to terms with the DPRK and accept its diplomatic presence in Tehran.

North Korea soon established its embassy in Tehran in late June 1973 and immediately invited the Iranian prime minister, Amir-ʿAbbās Hoveydā (q.v.), to pay an official visit to the DPRK. The invitation, which surprised many in the media, was politely declined by Hoveydā who could not leave the country due to overwhelming official duties. Iran still preferred to approach Pyongyang cautiously following its establishment of official ties with the DPRK and to manage its relationship with the East Asian country through Tehran's embassy in Beijing. Iran and North Korea subsequently signed a number of bilateral agreements related to trade (1973), culture (1974), and an inter-state news agency (1978), and some low-profile officials from Pyongyang, many of whom specialized in economics, visited Tehran before the Pahlavi monarchy toppled in early 1979. During this period of around six years, the North Korean media usually refrained from openly criticizing Iran's political system or its general handling of foreign policy, tending instead to take a sanguine, and often neutral, view of different aspects of the ongoing economic developments and positive social changes taking place within Iranian society (*Pyongyang*

Times, 29 October 1977, p. 4).

From August 1973 to January 1979, therefore, Iran's relationship with North Korea, both politically and economically, was very limited in scope; closer ties between Tehran and Pyongyang were to materialize after the fall of the Pahlavi regime, when the Islamic Republic briskly embraced the DPRK in spite of its anti-communist ideology and its "neither the East nor the West (*na šarqi na ḡarbi*)" rhetoric. Moreover, the DPRK regime and its affiliated media capitalized on the ideological affinity between the two countries by issuing forth many of the same slogans as their new Iranian counterparts (*Pyongyang Times*, 14 April 1979, p. 4). Soon after, the growing partnership between the Islamic Republic and North Korea was to be further fortified by the flow of North Korean arms to Tehran upon the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War, when the reclusive communist regime in Iraq, which had been waiting in the wings, was eager to take advantage of a newly beneficial diplomatic situation between Iran and the DPRK (*New York Times*, 19 December 1982, p. 1).

As a consequence of an expanding bilateral relationship and an increase in behind-the-scenes military deals signed by Tehran and Pyongyang, many top-level Iranian politicians visited North Korea throughout the 1980s. A top member of the judiciary and dozens of Iranian parliamentarians visited the DPRK before the speaker of parliament, Akbar Hāšemi Rafsanjāni, and Defense Minister Sayyed Musā Nāmju met the North Korea paramount leader, Kim Il-sung, in Pyongyang in September 1981 (*Pyongyang Times*, 26 September 1981, p. 1). Prime Minister Mir-Ḥosayn Musawi and Defense Minister Moḥammad Salimi were the next top Iranian politicians to pay a visit to the DPRK, arriving for a three-day visit in October 1983 (*Reuters*, 24 October 1983). In 1985, Rafsanjāni returned to Pyongyang when he was still the speaker of parliament; his tour was soon followed by another top-level visit to the DPRK, that of (then) President Ali Khamenei (ʿAli Ḵāmenaʾi), who also met the North Korean leader in 1989, though the main purpose and agenda of this meeting were, as usual, not disclosed (International Business Publication, p. 31).

The conclusion of the Iran-Iraq War, nevertheless, did not put an end to Iran's ties with North Korea, as the two countries managed to further develop their wartime relationship well into the 1990s and beyond. Throughout the war, Iran had managed its Pyongyang embassy through an ambassador, whereas it ran its embassy in Seoul through a *chargé d'affaires* (having previously downgraded its relations with the ROK) until early 1989. In the period following the Iran-Iraq War, military cooperation and defense connections

still remained the linchpin of Tehran's interactions with Pyongyang (Metzler, p. 94). Military cooperation between Iran and North Korea often involved the use of third parties, a fact that made other nations with interests in the Middle East somewhat anxious about the extent and scope of Pyongyang's relationship with Tehran (*Korea Herald*, 29 June 1993, p. 1).

Contrary to the lack of enough attention and international media coverage about Tehran-Seoul relations, however, Iran's relationship with North Korea has been widely publicized over the past two decades. As a matter of fact, Tehran's interactions with Pyongyang have been largely scrutinized in all aspects, making the very subject of bilateral political, economic, and even cultural ties between the two partners appear as an international issue (Dennis, p. 87). The core of such widespread international publicity concentrated on the alleged nuclear program in Iran and Tehran's nuclear and missile cooperation with Pyongyang (Reese, pp. 27-28). While many high-ranking officials in Iran commented publicly about their multifaceted relationship and friendly ties with North Korea on many occasions, they vehemently denied any nuclear and missile cooperation between Tehran and Pyongyang. Repudiating these connections with the DPRK, Iranian authorities also took the allegation as an opportunity to occasionally emphasize their country's self-sufficiency in the field of missile production and nuclear technology (*Daily Yomiuri*, 30 November 2007).

The nature and scope of Iran's relationship with the DPRK regime under Maḥmud Aḥmadinežād were particularly overstated, and even statistics were sometimes manipulated to substantiate some fallacious arguments (Economist Intelligence Unit, p. 64). Neither Aḥmadinežād nor his key ministers ever visited North Korea or discussed in public any important issues in Iran's relations with the DPRK. Whenever they were interviewed with regard to some controversial matters in Tehran's ties with Pyongyang, they denied emphatically any wrongdoing and instead boasted about their own country's indigenous capabilities to meet whatever technological requirements their country needed, be it missile technology or nuclear energy equipment. Under the Rouhani government, moreover, Iran was even less inclined to highlight its interactions with the communist regime of North Korea. As compared to a number of high-profile diplomatic and non-political delegations from the DPRK to Tehran, few, if any, important officials from Iran have visited North Korea in recent years (*Mehr News Agency*, 2 July 2016). At some point during the nuclear negotiations, the Iranian foreign ministry was even willing to

scuttle a planned visit to Tehran by a top North Korean delegation largely for the sake of making more progress in Tehran's crucial talks with the five-plus-one party (*Jahan News*, 17 February 2014).

One other tipping point was Iran's explicit support for the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula during Park's official negotiations with Rouhani in Tehran in May 2016. The news story, which was broadcast with great fanfare, particularly by the South Korean media outlets, was nevertheless interpreted by some observers as Iran's further "distance" from North Korea in the wake of successfully signing and implementing the nuclear deal, although the DPRK rather preferred to ignore Rouhani's statement in the first place (*Yonhap News Agency*, 3 May 2016). But it would be an exaggeration to claim that Iran was really going to dissociate itself significantly from North Korea any time soon. The Rouhani government may have had some other priorities and preferences in foreign policy, but it was not in a position to dislodge Iran's connections to a number of its foreign partners such as the DPRK. Additionally, such a major shift would also not take place because of Tehran's closer political ties with Seoul or because of South Korea's diplomatic campaign to draw a wedge between Iran and North Korea.

COMMERCIAL CONNECTIONS

South Korea and Iran. As the South Korean government embarked on an ambitious program of industrialization and economic development in the early 1960s, its attention to Iran, and the Middle East in general, increased subsequently. After establishing diplomatic relations with Iran in October 1962, South Korea opened the first Middle East branch of the Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA) in Tehran in August 1964. Moreover, the Republic of Korea imported the very first supply of oil from the Persian Gulf state of Kuwait in 1962. In 1964, Kuwait still provided 100 percent of South Korea's oil, but Seoul soon started to buy petroleum from Iran (Dent, p. 148). Kuwait and Iran, then, became the major suppliers of South Korea's oil throughout the 1960s. In 1968, Iran and Kuwait, along with Saudi Arabia, were the Persian Gulf region's top petroleum producers. The more the Korean economy came to depend on oil, the more it had to depend on the Persian Gulf for the requisite petroleum (Metraux).

In 1967, South Korea imported $19.4 million (Kuwait $19 million and Saudi Arabia $418,000) worth of petroleum from the Persian Gulf, which significantly increased to $250 million in 1973, when its three import partners

in the region consisted of Saudi Arabia ($154 million), Kuwait ($82.5 million), and Iran ($13.5 million). In fact, South Korea imported more than twenty times the total value of its exports to the Persian Gulf in 1967. By 1973, Seoul still imported seven times more than what it could export to its trading partners in the region. On the eve of the first oil shock in 1973, however, Seoul's commodity shipments to Persian Gulf countries had shot up to a total of $38 million with Iran ($16 million), Saudi Arabia ($13 million) and Kuwait ($7.5 million) as its top export markets. More interestingly, these three countries were the ROK's top export destinations in the entire Middle East at the time, receiving a huge chunk of its manufactured products that were sent to the region (Brown, p. 46; Field, p. 156).

The skyrocketing of Iran's oil revenues and its economic development plans encouraged Seoul to further improve its ties with Tehran. One important development in bilateral relations was the expansion of the Korean construction industry into Iran when Hyundai Construction signed a contract to build a shipyard for the Iranian Navy near Bandar Abbas, a port city in southern Iran. Basically, the petroleum price explosion had turned the major oil producers of the Persian Gulf region, including Iran, into the El Dorado of the world construction industry with huge profits lying on the ground waiting to be scooped up and shipped back home by sophisticated foreign contractors (The World Bank, 1993, p. 127). By April 1979, Korean contractors would establish about five percent of their construction business in Iran. In 1978, the number of Koreans working in Iran reached 7,418 people.

More important than construction, however, Iran became South Korea's biggest export market in the Middle East by 1975, when the country alone accounted for more than 30 percent of the East Asian nation's total exports to the region. For that reason, Seoul concluded a massive deal with Tehran in November 1976. This deal made possible for trade between the two countries to increase further, providing new opportunities for Korean companies active in various economic areas from manufactured products to construction materials. Throughout the 1970s, moreover, Iran maintained its position as the third largest supplier of Seoul's oil imports. In 1975, the total volume of bilateral trade between Iran and South Korea had reached around $158 million, which almost doubled the 1974 figure of $79 million. This figure approached $340 million and $350 million in 1976 and 1977, respectively. South Korea first experienced a trade surplus with Iran in 1974, then the figures for the following three years were in Tehran's favor, mainly because of

an increase in the oil that Seoul was importing from this Persian Gulf country (Hapdong News Agency, 1987, p. 215).

In the early 1980s, when Iran's pattern of alliance changed and its position in the international system was redefined, the South Korean state virtually adopted a strategy of *cheongkyong bunri* (the separation of politics from economics) in its bilateral relationship with Iran, attempting to meet both its alliance commitment and secure the relative gain it could enjoy from sticking to a symbiotic approach vis-a-vis Iran. Because of the troubled political environment in Iran, however, Tehran's bilateral economic cooperation with Seoul subsequently suffered. Economically, a number of important contracts and business deals between Iran and South Korea were canceled, and some of the ongoing activities between the two nations were temporarily put on hold. As a case in point, the 50-50 joint refining venture between the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) and Ssangyang Corporation was among the projects that the new Iranian government soon abandoned (*Financial Times*, 1983, p. 481).

In the wake of the downgrading of diplomatic ties between South Korea and Iran from the ambassadorial level to a chilly *chargé d'affaires* and the discontinuation of some economic commitments between the two countries in the midst of a bitter regional conflict involving Iran and Iraq, Seoul still decided to maintain as many connections as it could with Tehran, especially through the purchase of petroleum. South Korea tactically decreased its oil imports from Saudi Arabia and replaced the shortage with an increased supply from Iran (Yager, p. 73). This strategy served to protect Seoul's interests in Tehran in two different ways. First, South Korea was able to keep its foothold in Iran both to assure the reliability of its oil supply and to keep an eye on the ongoing subjects in the country, which was potentially its biggest export market in the entire Middle East. Second, the energy trade facilitated South Korea's access to Iran, which in turn, allowed it to keep the rising North Korean presence in Tehran in check.

After the conclusion of the Iran-Iraq War, Tehran and Seoul agreed to restart the annual meetings of Iran-Korea Joint Economic Commissions (Komisiun-e moštarak-e eqteṣādi-e Irān wa Kore), which had been suspended since 1979. By late 1980s and early 1990s, the annual bilateral trade between the two countries had reached approximately $2 billion, including $700 million in direct trade. Moreover, South Korea managed to invest in a number of energy and other industrial projects in Iran throughout the 1990s and beyond, and it

was able to benefit actively from Iran's booming construction sector in the period following the Iran-Iraq War. Some of the investment projects undertaken by South Korean companies, either by themselves or in cooperation with other international investors, included the Bāfq-Bandar ʿAbbās railroad, the Tehran Metro program, the Kangan (Kangān, a county on the Persian Gulf) gas refinery plan, and several other offshore oil and gas projects near Iran's Persian Gulf islands. One important auto-manufacturing project arose from a deal that was made between South Korea's Daewoo Business Group and Iran's Kerman Automotive Industries Co. (KAIC) in Seoul in 1993 to set up a joint assembly line in Kerman Province (*Korea Herald*, 16 May 1993, p. 8).

Meanwhile, South Korea moved to become Iran's fourth largest export partner in 1996, 1997, 1998, and 1999 before it became the country's second largest export partner after Japan in 2000. It was also Iran's third largest import partner in 1999 and soon became its second largest import partner after Germany in 2000. Moreover, the participation of South Korean contractors in Iranian projects increased later on when the two countries signed a memorandum of understanding in May 2001 in order to promote bilateral cooperation in the construction sector. By that time, 19 Korean companies had partaken in about 60 projects valued at approximately $4.4 billion since 1975, when Hyundai Construction had won a contract to erect a shipyard for the Iranian navy. Even if their construction earnings from Iran were not as high as those from Saudi Arabia, South Korean companies, especially those engaged in diverse business activities, still strove to maintain their presence in Iran partly because of its larger consumption market (Hanieh, pp. 172-77).

The first decade of the twenty-first century heralded the tidings of a robust economic relationship between South Korea and Iran in spite of a dearth of political interaction between Seoul and Tehran. South Korean companies were encouraged to invest more in Iran, especially in its oil and gas projects, and the Iranian government was subsequently motivated to give preferential treatment to South Korean firms in many other economic sectors (*Mehr News Agency*, 7 February 2007). The LG Construction Company was awarded a $1.6 billion contract to develop phases 9 and 10 of the South Pars gas fields project, while Daewoo Motors was invited to further invest in Iran's Kerman Khodro Corporation. Tehran and Seoul set up a joint investment committee in 2008, concentrating their plans on major development projects to be prioritized in Iran. As part of this joint initiative, for instance, Daelim Company was offered

a lucrative deal valued at around $2 billion in 2009 to participate in the development of the second part of phase 12 of the South Pars gas fields project. At the same time, Iran remained one of South Korea's top suppliers of petroleum, providing roughly 10 percent of Seoul's total oil imports in 2011 (*Reuters*, 8 February 2007; *Associated Press*, 13 March 2007).

During Lee Myung-bak's presidency (2008-13), nonetheless, there were numerous economic developments between the two countries. Iran remained South Korea's largest trading partner and export market in the greater Middle East, and the volume of two-way trade between the two countries reached an all-time high of more than $20 billion, a sum that included both formal and sub-rosa transactions. A large number of South Korean businesses were willing to pour their resources into this Persian Gulf country, contributing to the omnipresence of Korean vehicles and electronic goods throughout Iranian markets, which were once dominated by Japanese brands. Additionally, a sudden hike in oil prices in 2008 that had brought increased revenues into Iran, a more vigorous East-looking foreign policy pursued by the Iranian government, and the promotion of South Korean products through official cultural channels each contributed to the dynamics of Seoul's new relationship with Tehran (Azad, 2013).

South Korea's rather close economic ties with Iran continued after Lee Myung-bak was replaced by his fellow conservative, Park Geun-hye. In particular, Park's visit to Tehran in May 2016 had pivotal economic implications for Korea's commercial connections to Iran. Accompanied by "the largest business delegation in the history of Korean presidential trips," her economic mission to Iran eventually benefited all those 236 participating entities, involving representatives of 146 small and medium-sized companies, 38 giant corporations, and 52 bodies affiliated with business organizations, public institutions, and hospitals. Park particularly raised the ante when she mentioned Iran "a land of opportunity," and urged her fellow citizens on multiple occasions to repeat a "second Middle East boom" by taking advantage of huge opportunities that Iran could present (*Yonhap News Agency*, 9 May 2016).

During Park's official visit to Iran, a flurry of lucrative deals were signed between the two countries, including 66 memorandums of understanding, most of which had something to do with bilateral economic interactions. It was estimated that such agreements were worth more than $37 billion, providing better opportunities for various Korean companies to participate in

many new projects in Iran ranging from construction to energy facilities. In a press conference after their summit, Rouhani and Park also promised to expand their present economic relationship from about $6 billion to more than $18 billion in the future (*Yonhap News Agency*, 11 May 2016). Rouhani also urged Park to work together with him in order to "turn trade relations to deep-rooted and strategic economic relations" between the two parties. As soon as Park returned home, Korea announced that its president decided to spike her "biggest-ever economic accomplishment" with generosity by unveiling a $25 billion finance package, apparently the largest of its kind, in order to help its companies participate better in a number of joint projects in Iran (*Tasnim News Agency*, 16 May 2016).

North Korea and Iran. Tehran's overall contacts with Pyongyang, whether economically or diplomatically, were negligible throughout the 1970s. Both countries still expanded their bilateral agreements and protocols from the 1970s and had them apply to other fields such as a fishery (1981); economics, science, and trade (1982); sports (1982); and mining and technical aid (1988). Moreover, there were opportunities for a better bilateral relationship between the two countries, especially after the Iran-Iraq War erupted in the early 1980s. Iran's request for arms was immediately accepted by North Korea. The DPRK did not hesitate to seize the opportunity at hand, agreeing to supply the Islamic Republic with different types of high-powered weapons (*New York Times*, 19 December 1982, p. 1). Pyongyang, therefore, dispatched its first shipment of military cargo to Iran soon after the war started in September 1980; the DPRK gradually became Tehran's largest arms supplier by the end of 1982, providing Iran with all sorts of equipment from tanks to artillery pieces, mortars, and anti-aircraft weapons. It has been estimated by various sources that Iran's arms purchases from North Korea in 1982 alone reached $500 million to $2 billion or around 40 percent of Tehran's total purchases of military equipment for that year. North Korea was also asked to serve as a conduit by which both China and the Soviet Union could send military aid to Iran in the initial stages of the war (Garver, pp. 170–71).

In the period following the Iran-Iraq War, military cooperation and defense connections still remained the linchpin of Tehran's interactions with Pyongyang. The two countries had previously signed a half-a-billion-dollar missile technology development deal in 1987, which was to come to fruition and expand even further after the war. In order to coordinate better their bilateral interactions related to various military and political areas, Tehran

and Pyongyang cautiously and quietly set up a joint defense commission in December 1989. As part of such a process, a number of Pyongyang-made missiles, short-range ballistic missiles in particular, found their way into Iran at a time when arms sales constituted a significant portion of North Korea's exports. Moreover, the North Koreans also repeatedly invited Iranian officials to come and observe their own military operations in order to convince their counterparts of the DPRK's technological know-how and military capability (*Korea Herald*, 29 June 1993, p. 1). Such a cordial display of friendship by the North Koreans led to the presence of a number of Iranian military and civilian observers at Pyongyang's launch of its putative Taepodong intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) in 1998, as well as at the follow-up nuclear tests.

Meanwhile, non-military areas of cooperation between Iran and North Korea received a great deal of attention right after the Iran-Iraq War. Pyongyang asked Tehran to provide technical assistance for the DPRK's oil exploration endeavors on its western continental shelf. In 1993, the 5th Pyongyang-Tehran joint economic commission, hosted by North Korea, served as a sign of their mutual intention to swiftly expand their cooperation beyond the military realm. At that time, the DPRK had every reason to want to increase its economic dealings with Iran, specifically as a source for its energy supply, because the communist nation had been suffering from energy shortages caused by its having limited or (on occasion) no access, in the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, to the oil that it used to receive from Moscow. Following the fall of the eastern bloc and the disappearance of many socialist allies, therefore, the continuation of bilateral relations with Tehran provided Pyongyang with a good opportunity to receive, at times, up to 40 percent of its badly needed oil requirements in return for technical assistance and various other non-economic services (*KBS World*, 24 September 2016).

The bilateral relationship between Iran and the DPRK was of course improving from one decade to the next, but nothing much came of their behind-the-scenes meetings or the many contracts they signed over the years. In sharp contrast to the ubiquitous existence of South Korean products and brands throughout the Iranian society, however, it was almost impossible to find any trace of a North Korean marque or commodity in the country (*Trend News Agency*, 23 February 2014). Moreover, news stories about developments in Tehran-Pyongyang relations commonly pointed to some sort of energy deal between the two countries, but it was not clear whether the cash-strapped DPRK regime was going to import Iranian oil only for urgent and non-

commercial domestic consumption, or whether it planned to use it for the purposes of certain clandestine development projects (*Mehr News Agency*, 20 September 2015).

Meanwhile, North Korea was dubiously absent from relevant data and statistics released regularly by the government agencies and public institutions in Iran. When an annual report on foreign trade was issued by an economic organization, it was often hard to find any direct reference to the DPRK, as if there was no commercial activity involving the two parties worth mentioning. For some time, the interactions between Iran and the DPRK touched upon sensitive matters that required adequate attention and delicate dedication. It was often a matter of national security not to divulge certain data and statistics related to various aspects of bilateral cooperation between Tehran and Pyongyang. Sometimes, this was done intentionally only to stave off any abuse and interference by a number of other countries which used to pay close attention to any sort of official and unofficial interactions between the two countries. In other less pressing circumstances, the approach could be just an innocuous divisionary tactic in order to mutely mislead other rivals and keep them guessing.

Finally, Iran did not always have to pay ready cash for whatever it needed to buy from North Korea. Nor everything Tehran was importing from Pyongyang had an essentially military component. The two countries, therefore, decided to engage occasionally in a system of barter so that Tehran could pay back to Pyongyang a required and valuable commodity other than money (*Tasnim News Agency*, 16 September 2014). Energy resources, oil in particular, were an important item that the DPRK desperately needed to survive after it lost the previous regular supply by the Soviet Union or China. Such a pattern of international trade between Iran and North Korea could also involve a third party, especially China, because Pyongyang did not always have enough sophisticated commercial vessels to handle its direct business with Tehran. Even when North Korea could manage singlehandedly its own non-military commercial interactions with Iran other than using air cargoes, the long distance between the two countries required another party to guard the sea lines of transportation for any Pyongyang-bound ship carrying oil or any other product from Iran (*Tasnim News Agency*, 26 January 2015).

CULTURAL INTERACTIONS

South Korea and Iran. There have been miscellaneous connections between

Iranian and Korean people in ancient times. Such interactions, indirectly and sometimes directly, were made possible primarily through the famous Silk Road, with China playing the role of an important intermediary. Iranians are thought to have considerably influenced, through these varied interchanges, some material and non-material affairs of Koreans, ranging from arts and architecture to religion and other ideas. There have been some significant studies showing how the bureaucratic system of the Sasanian Empire in ancient Persia could have subsequently influenced the Korean bureaucracy, and to some extent its Yangban mentality, during the Koryo and early Choson periods (Duncan, pp. 279-80). The Tang dynasty of China was especially helpful in facilitating such influence because, under the Tang dynasty, the transfer of Iranian civilizational achievements to the East experienced its halcyon days.

At the same time, Iranian attention to or interactions with Korea can be seen in a number of Persian works. A famous work written (ca. 846) by the Iranian historian and geographer Ebn Ḵordāḏbeh (q.v.), *Ketāb al-masālek wa'l-mamālek*, is the first non-East Asian reference to Korea (al-Šilā 'Silla') available in recorded history (p. 70). Whether his indispensable contribution needs to be regarded only as part of the Iranian historical experience or as a mere quirk of fate, its author, Ebn Ḵordāḏbeh, was virtually the first scholar to introduce the Korean Peninsula to the world (see also Chung and Hourani, pp. 658-59). Another influential source is the Persian epic poem, *Kuš-nāma* (q.v.; composed 6th/12th cent.; Ṣafā, pp. 296-300), which provides a good reference to the ancient Silla, and the work is particularly well-known among many Koreans, including the former president, Park Geun-hye, for depicting a tale of romance supposedly between a Persian prince and a Korean princess from the kingdom of Silla.

Koreans, however, were not only a borrower from the Iranian legacy; they also became a transmitter of that heritage to their neighboring nations, the Japanese in particular. Because of its unique location, the Korean Peninsula had inexorably been destined to be a convenient bridge of sorts to transfer to the Japanese archipelago whatever imaginable, from migrating people to manufactured products and from loaned ideas to lullaby illusions (Fenollosa, p. 61). Of course, such an intermediary role was not always played directly and voluntarily, nor were the acts of transferring goods and ideas from one part to another done immediately or perpetually. During the reign of Mongols, for instance, the Korean Peninsula itself became something of a hotbed of international interactions between people of various races and cultures. This

was a time when the Mongol-led bureaucracy had to rely increasingly on capable and qualified people from many other nations, such as Iranians, to manage its domestic and foreign affairs (Lane, pp. 223-25; Robinson, p. 52). Even when the Mongols were eventually expelled from the Korean Peninsula and China, the legacy and impact of previous interchanges over centuries were not to disappear swiftly, no matter if frequent direct people-to-people connections had to be interrupted for a couple of centuries to come.

With regard to contemporary interactions, Tehran and Seoul signed a Treaty of Friendship during an official visit to the Republic of Korea by the Iranian foreign minister, Ardašir Zāhedi, in May 1969. It was also the first time when the two counties formally signed an agreement since they established their official diplomatic ties in 1962 (*Korea Herald*, 6 May 1969, p. 4). The measure later led to various cultural interactions between Iran and South Korea, particularly in some areas related to sports and education. A number of friendly soccer matches were arranged between the national teams of Iran and the ROK, while high profile academic delegates from both sides found new propitious occasions to visit each other for educational or other purposes. Moreover, other bilateral exchanges made by political and economic officials could sometimes spawn more cultural initiatives between Tehran and Seoul. As a case in point, the Korean-Iranian Friendship Association (KIFA; Anjoman-e dusti-e Irān wa Koreh) was inaugurated in July 1978 on the occasion of a visit to South Korea by Jaʿfar Šarif-Emāmi, president of the Senate and prime minister of Iran.

Among all cultural schemes launched between South Korea and Iran during the Pahlavi dynasty, none was probably more imperishable and enduring than the twinning of towns. The idea of sisterhood between Seoul and Tehran, which was proposed initially by the Koreans through the Seoul Metropolitan Government in 1976, eventually made it possible for the two cities in 1977 to each designate one street in the name of the other political capital. The move was not only unprecedented in South Korea's relationship with the entire Middle East region at that time, the initiative also remained as an allegorical edifice of cultural connections between South Korea and Iran. In particular, the names of both streets continued, often invisibly, to play this significant role when the two countries were not in good terms with each other economically and especially politically. They contributed to such a function in spite of the fact that "Teheran-ro" or "Tehran Street" in Seoul grew over time to reify its position as one of the wealthiest and most prestigious streets in the

entire Korean Peninsula, while its sister in Tehran, “Seoul Street,” maintained its rather atypical identity as compared to many other routes and roadways in the northern part of the Iranian capital (MobileReference).

Following the fall of the Pahlavi monarchy and the ascendancy of the Islamic Republic in 1979, cultural interactions between Iran and South Korea were negatively affected for some time. Part of the matter could be essentially attributed to the fact that the two countries did not have bilateral diplomatic ties at ambassadorial level for close to a decade throughout the 1980s. This was also a peculiar period when Iran was heavily obsessed with its ongoing military conflict with the neighboring Iraq. Both problems heavily influenced Tehran’s previous interactions with the ROK in all political, economic, and cultural areas, although South Korea still tried to maintain some of its ongoing connections to this Persian Gulf country. Besides, during those bloody and burdensome years, Iran did not engage in much cultural interactions with many other nations around the world, particularly with the Western countries whose culture and moral moorings had been avowedly singled out somehow as a setback rather than as a solution.

Under the presidency of Akbar Hāšemi Rafsanjāni (1989-97) and his successor, Sayyed Moḥammad Ḵātami (1997-2005), Iran became more interested in forging better non-political connections to other parts of the world, since it desperately needed some foreign assistance to reconstruct its wartime rubbles. Rafsanjāni mainly focused on economic and financial exchanges with some other nations, while Ḵātami became renowned mostly for his cultural proclivities. But none of the two presidents really made substantial changes in Tehran’s lackadaisical cultural relationship with the East Asian countries, including South Korea. While Rafsanjāni had been destined to engage primarily in political and economic fronts, Ḵātami was expected to contribute particularly to the important field of culture because his leitmotif of “dialogue among civilizations” was thought to be first and foremost a cultural project.

Compared to the foregoing situation, however, culture abruptly became a major characteristic of Iranian-South Korean relations during the presidency of Aḥmadinežād (2005-13). It is true that the ROK also managed to experience the pinnacle of its economic and technological interactions with Iran; nevertheless, even the Koreans themselves were surprised to see that all of a sudden the presence of their culture in Iran reached its acme before Aḥmadinežād finished the first half of his two-term office. This rather unusual phenomenon coincided with the presidency of Lee Myung-bak, who

capitalized on this particular area more vigorously than the previous Korean governments did. The main objective was to introduce certain aspects of Korean culture and promote some sort of pro-Korean sentiment in the greater Middle East region, particularly among young people, through official cultural channels and other relevant diplomatic activities (*Korea Times*, 18 May 2008, p. 7).

The television serial *Jawāher-i dar qaṣr* 'Jewel in the Palace' was the first Korean drama that piqued the interest of many Iranian viewers across the country. The historical Hallyu serial, which won an audience rating of over 50 percent, kindled the curiosity of many Iranians about the East Asian country and its culture. The unanticipated success of the "Jewel in the Palace" drama augured well for a relatively bright future of other Hallyu products in Iran. Indeed, if "Jewel in the Palace" was a major hit in Iran, the next mythological drama, "Jumong," turned out to be a smash hit. In fact, no East Asian movie product had ever succeeded to attract a flurry of Iranians into watching the Korean serial of "Jumong," which was broadcast over a national television channel on a weekly basis. "Jumong," which had been dubbed from Korean into Persian as "The Myth of Jumong" (*Afsāna-ye Jumung*), attracted many fans who were sometimes congregating in public places such as hospitals or bus and train terminals in order not to miss any part of the mythological story (*Yonhap News Agency*, 29 April 2016).

During Park Geun-hye's visit to Iran, moreover, Tehran and Seoul agreed to host a "Year of Korea-Iran Cultural Exchange" scheduled for 2017. The two governments also reached a conclusion to set up a Korean cultural center in Tehran in order to smooth the way for various bilateral measures touching upon this yet influential area of cooperation involving both parties (*Tehran Times*, 3 October 2016, p. 2). For obvious reasons, the new approach of the ROK government signifies the fact that Koreans were essentially contented with regard to the popularity and success of their Hallyu products in Iran over the past years, hoping that fresh investments on different forms of cultural issues can actually oil the wheels of their overall national interests in Iran. Moreover, their relatively successful cultural story in Iran had convinced them that the country has a huge potential, at least in the wider Middle East region, to once again score good for South Korea's recent program of "cultural diplomacy" and "soft power" promotion on a world scale.

North Korea and Iran. The appearance of North Korean culture in Iran has virtually been imperceptible when compared to various forms of cultural

interactions between South Korea and this Persian Gulf country. In spite of so much international talks and publicity about close cooperation between the DPRK and the Islamic Republic, moreover, interested Iranian people by and large have hardly been offered a good chance to experience personally some elements of North Korean culture. Probably few Iranians have ever watched a dubbed North Korean movie or drama broadcasted from a major national television channel based in Tehran. Nor have many of them been to a theater hall where an orchestra of traditional Korean music had traveled from Pyongyang with the sole purpose of demonstrating a live program for their Iranian audience. It is also unlikely that a national or local museum in Iran would have assigned part of its annual schedule to putting on show some cultural stuff borrowed from North Korea. Scientific, educational, and some other patterns of cultural exchanges involving both Iranian and North Korean academic bodies and research institutions have been equally dismal and disappointing as well.

Iranian and North Korean officials from different ministries and cultural bodies have signed dozens of agreements since early 1970s in order to either foster or facilitate various forms of cultural interchanges between the two parties. But the problem is that bilateral accords and agreements of such genre have either been shelved somewhere in the bureaucracy or their implementation, for whatever reason, has taken place only partially and temporarily. It is, therefore, hard to say that the two countries are having good cultural relations only when their national soccer or swimming teams have to ineluctably face each other during an international tournament or regional sports competition hosted by Iran, North Korea, or a third country. Moreover, it cannot be regarded as a sign of bona fide cultural swapping between Tehran and Pyongyang when a national TV channel in Iran runs a report about the contemporary international controversy of the North Korean nuclear issue. Genuine and uncontaminated forms of cultural exchanges between Iran and the DPRK have thus been rather dim and dissatisfactory.

Rather than pure culture, nevertheless, political culture has played an important role in a relatively distant cultural relationship between Iran and North Korea. The political culture of their connectivity, real or imagined, has itself been exhibited largely through formal channels and venues. Many Iranian and North Korean officials have often underscored their shared political cultural attitudes and united policies vis-à-vis certain foreign powers and rival ideologies. During various high profile diplomatic meetings as well

as in the sidelines of many regional and international forums and seminars, the two sides have actually strived to accentuate the existence of a common political culture between both societies by pointing at their persistent and uncompromising resistance against the powers and countries which have always tried to harm them in one way or another. Such declared position has also been a leitmotiv of succeeding North Korean ambassadors to Tehran who, over numerous interviews and speeches, have highlighted time and again a shared political culture between the DPRK and this Persian Gulf country.

Iranian studies in Korea. As South Korea's interactions with Iran developed, its academic institutions began to turn their attention toward Iran as well. In 1976, a department of Persian language was created at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (HUFS), where roughly 30 undergraduate students were subsequently admitted to the program per academic year. The HUFS also established the Iranian Culture Center in 1992 in order to provide closer attention to the field of Iranian studies and more opportunities for sophisticated cultural interactions between the ROK and Iran. Over the past several decades, moreover, various collections of Persian books and educational materials have been donated by interested Iranian individuals and relevant public institutions to dozens of South Korea's academic organizations and important public establishments such as National Assembly Library of Korea (*gukhoe toseogwan*) and National Library of Korea (*guklib jungang toseogwan*). In addition, a number of principal Persian works have been translated to Korean by some leading specialists in the field.

With regard to the subject of Iranian studies in Korea, nonetheless, one significant issue is that this academic area has by and large been incorporated into two broader fields of Middle East Studies and Islamic Studies (Korea Muslim Federation, 1996, p. 13). Since the time Park Chung-hee established the Korea Foundation for Middle East Studies (KFMES) in 1975, this rather wide academic area has been primarily assigned three key tasks: to conduct specialized research on different matters about the Middle East; to provide Korean institutions and enterprises with consultations about politico-economic and cultural affairs of the region; and to manage orientation seminars and tutorials for those Korean nationals who were going to take on a typical job in a Mideast country (Disney). Such undertakings became an important function of four Korean universities, including the HUFS, Myongji University, Busan University of Foreign Studies, and Chosun University. A bulk of works on different subjects related to Iran has therefore been produced by

these four academic bodies; other Korean universities and policy research centers have also occasionally conducted an Iran-related project as well.

Korean Studies in Iran. Academic studies in Iran about the Korean Peninsula are not generally satisfactory yet. The available literature about the subject in the Persian language shows that academics have been much more negligent regarding this topic than their Korean counterparts, who have at least produced some works on the economy, society, and culture of Iran. As a matter of fact, a relative lack of area specialists choosing the Korean Peninsula as their primary or even secondary area of academic interest has been a major reason why this topic has received such limited attention. For many plausible reasons such as language barriers, scholars have generally been less willing to undertake a major research project about Korea. Moreover, Koreans have long lobbied to launch a Korean studies program at a major Iranian university such as the University of Tehran, but so far they have not been successful. In spite of such critical impediments, nevertheless, many interested Iranian scholars and graduate students have over years produced their own Korea-related works primarily by using secondary resources available in English. In more recent years, dozens of books in Korean have also been translated into Persian by a gradually increasing number of skillful and interested Iranian individuals.

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