From Silk Road to Bazargan border crossing

Commerce of Iran, Turkey 'unstoppable'

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INTERVIEW

The commercial relations of Iran and Turkey possess deep historical relations in the region; relations whose formation harkens back centuries ago and which, throughout history, have conjoined the commercial routes of the East and the West to one another. The place of the two countries along the historical Silk Road and the possession of shared terrestrial frontiers, alongside the geographical situation of Iran as a connective bridge betwixt the East and the West, has caused the economic exchanges of the two countries to perpetually have special significance.

This commercial nexus has preserved its significance under contemporary conditions as well. The routes that go through Iran are important to Turkey for access to the countries of Central Asia, Afghanistan, and the regions beyond the Caspian Sea. Likewise, Turkey is situated upon one of the most important terrestrial routes for Iran's commercial dealings with Europe. For this very reason, the economic and geographical necessities of the two countries are interwoven to such a degree that political developments and disagreements, although capable of affecting the trajectory and cost of commerce, do not eliminate the principle of the mutual need of both parties for the continuation of commercial exchanges.

Under conditions in which sanctions and international restrictions, banking pressures, and difficulties of maritime transportation have confronted the foreign commerce of Iran with challenges, the significance of land routes has garnered attention more than before, and Turkey can, in this midst, play an important role in the continuation of Iran's commerce with regional and European markets.

As Jalal Ebrahimi, the head of the Iran-Turkey Council of Common Commerce and the director of the Iran-Turkey Studies Center, said in an exclusive interview with Iran Daily, Turkey is one of the important chokepoints for Iran's commerce with Europe, and both countries, in many economic domains, are indispensable to one another. In the following, you read the detailed text of this conversation:

IRNA

IRAN DAILY: Given the current conditions of Iran's foreign commerce and the restrictions that have been imposed in the domain of maritime transportation and international exchanges, how do you assess the condition of the bilateral commerce of Iran and Turkey?

EBRAHIMI: Iran and Turkey are, in a sense, indispensable to each other. Turkey is an important gateway for our connection with Europe, while we are a gateway for Turkey's connection with Central Asian countries, Afghanistan, countries beyond the Caspian Sea and even eastern routes.

Of course, political issues and what is referred to today, in the discourse of international relations, as "geopolitics" and "political economy" can affect Iran-Turkey economic relations. Global pressures may also subject different governments, even against their wishes, to certain international requirements and pressures.

Nevertheless, we have extensive land borders with Turkey, and in this region, there are two important free trade zones, namely the Maku Free Zone and the Aras Free Zone, whose significance is linked to Iran-Turkey relations and trade.

What role do the Maku and Aras free zones play in developing Iran-Turkey trade relations?

In terms of area, the Maku Free Zone is one of the largest free zones in the world and has extensive potential. This zone begins at the Bazargan border crossing and encompasses a significant part of Iran's border strip. Further along, there is the Aras Free Zone, which extends that border strip.

This region has considerable potential in terms of territorial resources, agriculture, industry and commerce. In fact, if we want to discuss Iran's most important communication route with the West, one of the most important points is precisely this border region with Turkey.

Transit routes starting from Turkey enter Iran through the Bazargan border crossing. Part of this route heads toward the southern part of Iran and Khuzestan Province, while another part, as an eastern route, continues toward Khorasan Provinces and from there connects to Sarakhs, Bajgiran, Central Asia and even Afghanistan. Therefore, Iran and Turkey both lie along the historic Silk Road, and this historical legacy also demonstrates the importance of the two countries' trade relations.

To what extent does this historical legacy of Iran-Turkey trade relations remain important in the two countries' relations today?

Trade between Iran and the its western neighboring region — now called Turkey — has a very long history. If we examine the history of trade in the region, we can see that commercial routes linking East and West passed through Iranian territory.

This has even been mentioned in historical travelogues and Persian literature. Historical poems and writings refer to caravans that transported goods such as silk, spices and other products from East to West and vice versa. For example, Saadi speaks, in his works, of Kish Island and a merchant who traded with China and India; that is, the merchant imported goods from China and India and also transported silk from Iran to other regions.

Jalal Ebrahimi

Therefore, if we discuss Iran-Turkey commercial relations today, we must bear in mind that this connection has historical roots. If we put our ears to the ground, as I usually say, we can still hear the sound of the hooves and the bells of caravans that traveled along this route for centuries.

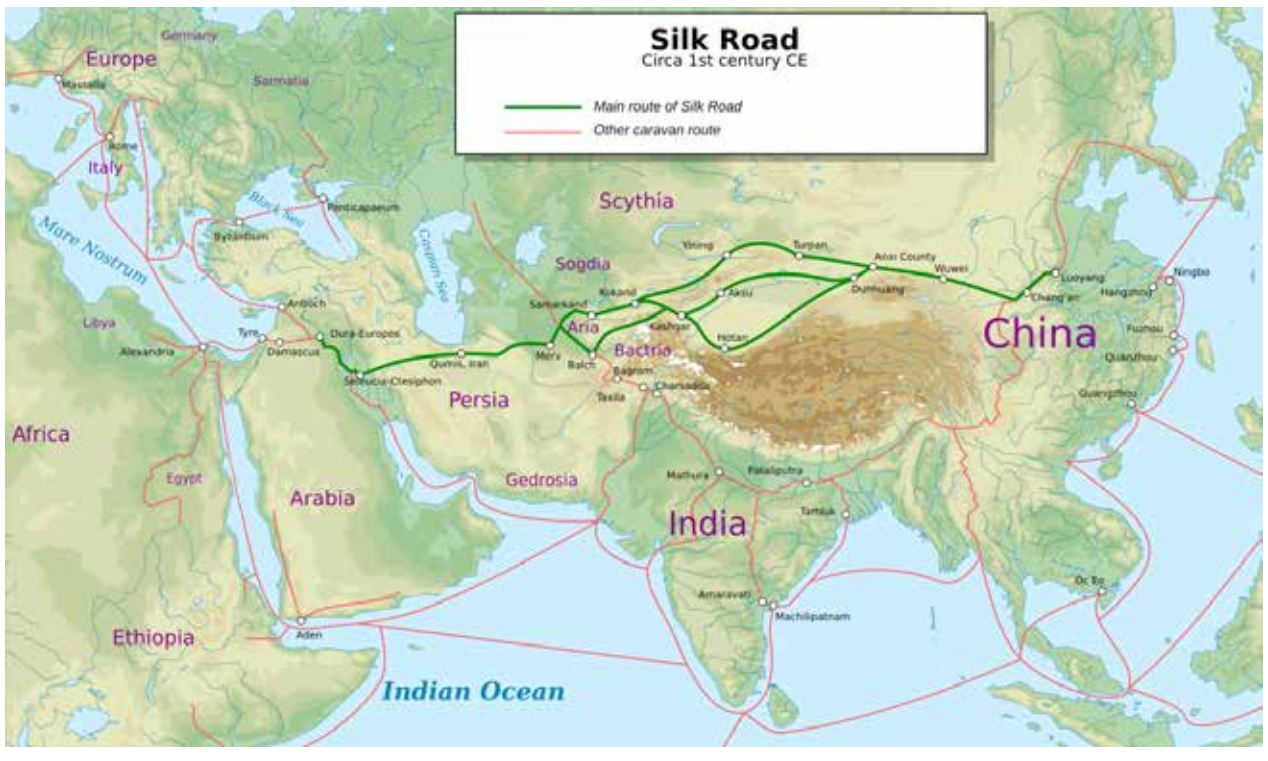
Despite this history, what are the most important current problems in land transportation between Iran and Turkey?

Limited logistical capacity and border infrastructure are insufficient to accommodate the increase in the volume of land trade and sometimes cause congestion and longer waiting times at the borders. At times, truck queues at the border become extremely long and even stretch for several kilometers. If we consider the length of each trailer to be approximately 15 meters, when 500 trucks are in line, the queue will be extremely substantial. We have approximately 500 incoming trucks and a similar number of outgoing trucks each day. That is enough to halt this process for one day as a large queue is formed on both sides of the border. This issue is more important in the case of perishable goods, food products and medicines, because these goods have specific shelf lives and requirements, and any prolonged stoppage can cause losses.

One of the serious problems is the shortage of parking facilities in customs areas. After entering, trucks must remain in parking areas for some time until the necessary permits are issued and the goods, if necessary, are tested. So, we face both a shortage of personnel and the need for some services to be provided around the clock.

On the other hand, welfare facilities in the border areas on both sides are insufficient. In many locations, there are no adequate facilities for drivers to rest or even proper sanitary facilities.

These are not complicated problems and can be resolved through planning and investment, but these seemingly simple issues can increase the time required for trucks to cross the border and raise the cost of trade.



Map of the Silk Road and other caravan routes of Eurasia in the 1st century A.D.
WIKIMEDIA

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