
WHY CENTRAL ASIA CANNOT AFFORD TO ABANDON THE IRANIAN ROUTE

- 28.08.2026

The Times of Central Asia (28 August 2026)

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Kazakhstan had barely secured a foothold in Iran's largest commercial port when renewed military escalation made the southern route risky again. The problem for Central Asia is that Iran is more than a trading partner. For a region without direct access to the open sea, it provides one of the few overland routes to the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean.

On June 28, Kazakhstan and Iran signed a 27-year build-operate-transfer (BOT) agreement for a Kazakh transport and logistics terminal at Shahid Rajaei Port in Bandar Abbas. The agreement allocates two years for construction and the following 25 for operation. Astana expects the terminal to provide more direct access to markets in the Gulf, South and Southeast Asia, and East Africa.

The project almost immediately found itself in a different reality. In July, U.S. strikes hit Iranian railway and coastal infrastructure. The Aq Taqueh Khan bridge on a rail route connecting Iran with Turkmenistan and, further north, with Kazakhstan, was damaged. There was no confirmed halt to Central Asian freight traffic, but military risk was no longer an abstract concern for carriers.

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