
COVID-19 INCREASES IMPORTANCE OF MIDDLE CORRIDOR

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Following the large coronavirus outbreak in Iran, neighboring countries quickly closed their borders with the Islamic Republic. More than a thousand Turkish trucks carrying goods to Central Asia found themselves stuck at checkpoints due to the closure of the Iran-Turkey and Iran-Turkmenistan borders (Daily Sabah, March 4). As a result, Ankara redirected its cargo trucks to the so-called Middle Corridor, a trade route connecting Turkey to Central Asia via Georgia, Azerbaijan and the Caspian Sea. The government of Turkey additionally increased the transit capacities of the Sarp, Turkgozu and Çıldır-Aktaş border gates (crossings) to Georgia. On April 10, during a video summit of the Turkic Council [1] multilateral organization of Turkic-speaking states [2] was held under the auspices of Azerbaijan's President İlham Aliyev, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan pointedly underlined the importance of the Middle Corridor.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected most international trade and transportation, it has also created new opportunities for some emerging routes. Until recent years, maritime shipping lanes and trade routes across Russia and Iran have connected Europe and Asia. Now, however, the Middle Corridor, through Turkey, Georgia, Azerbaijan and the Caspian Sea, is quickly becoming the shortest trade corridor between East and West.

Currently, Iran and Russia are the main export routes to Central Asia for Turkey. Approximately 30,000 trucks annually use the Iranian route, while another 9,000 trucks traverse Russia to reach the region. Past political disputes among these three countries, however, have created problems for Turkish truckers. In 2014, for example, Iran and Turkey were embroiled in a transit fee dispute (Financial Tribune, October 19, 2014). And, in 2015, after the downing of a Russian jet by Turkish F-16s near the Syrian border, Turkish trucks faced additional hurdles due to intensified Russian customs checks (Hurriyet Daily, November 26, 2015). These past developments and today's COVID-19 crisis have highlighted Turkey's need for alternative trading routes.

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