



სტრატეგიული, საგარეოაღმოსავლურ და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების კვლევითი ფონდი
GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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**A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF IRANIAN-GEORGIAN
DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS**

LEVAN ASATIANI

EXPERT OPINION



2016



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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Iran (Persia until 1935) and Georgia have accumulated a thousand-year experience of mutual relations, which, in various historical epochs, have noticeably differed in their intermittently hostile or allied nature. Both nations have preserved their historical memories, with their relevant and frequently opposing narratives.

After Georgia's "incorporation" into Russia in 1801, the immediate boundary between Georgia and Iran was eliminated and direct relations became limited. However, Iranian trade capital still thrived in Tbilisi, the center of the "Transcaucasian District" of the Russian Empire.

With the exception of ties maintained during the brief history of the sovereign Georgian Democratic Republic (1918-21), the disruption in bilateral relations between the two countries lasted until the 1990s.

The first contact between Georgian and Iranian officials took place prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, upon the declaration of the restoration of independence by Georgia. It was then, in Autumn of 1991, that Iranian diplomats arrived in Georgia from Tehran tasked with meeting President Gamsakhurdia in order to obtain information directly from the highest-ranking official regarding the ongoing political processes in the country (they were met with an already tense political situation in Tbilisi, as the opposition had begun to stage anti-government rallies), the prospects of relations with the Soviet Union/Russia, opportunities for bilateral Iranian-Georgian cooperation, and the political situation and regional security issues in the South Caucasus.

The visit was virtually of an unofficial, introductory nature, as the Soviet Union was drawing its last breath as a country and had not yet fully disintegrated. Thus, Iranian diplomats were taken by surprise when Gamsakhurdia raised the issue of recognizing Georgian independence. The diplomats also discussed various other issues at the Foreign Affairs Committee of the then-Supreme Council of Georgia.

The Iranians clearly saw that the collapse of the Soviet Union was inevitable and that instead of one super state, they would soon be co-existing with several new partners in the South Caucasus. Hence, this interest towards Georgia as a political center of the Caucasus was highly logical.

Following the official collapse of the Soviet Union on December 26, 1991, the so-called “pragmatic” government of Iran headed by President Rafsanjani, having recently emerged from a lengthy and economically devastating war with Iraq and taking into account new challenges and opportunities, began to establish its interests in the post-Soviet space and the Caucasus in particular.

While consideration of Russian interests was a necessary postulate for Iran, it nevertheless chose to vigorously engage in policy development in the Caucasus¹ in light of its Persian legacy of relations with the region.

During Mr. Eduard Shevardnadze’s tenure as Head of State (1993), Iranian emissaries once again arrived in Tbilisi. Their mission was to extend an invitation to visit the Republic Iran to the Georgian Head of State (Eduard Shevardnadze was officially elected President in 1995), who was an internationally-recognized politician with experience in serving as Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Soviet Union. At the time, Shevardnadze was still in international isolation (in the post-Soviet space, active relations were maintained only with the Republic of Turkmenistan under Saparmurat Niyazov), and the Georgian politician’s visit to the country served the interests of its pragmatic government. Mr. Shevardnadze accepted the invitation of President Rafsanjani.

It should be noted that, upon the restoration of independence, the **first** official visit of the head of the sovereign state of Georgia took place in the Islamic Republic of Iran, which in itself is a momentous fact. The visit was meticulously prepared for by both sides: 22 cooperation agreements were signed in almost all areas. As a result of the visit, the “post-Soviet” Georgia gained an ally in the region, which became one of its first trade and economic partners. In was in 1993 that Iran opened an embassy in Tbilisi, while a Georgian embassy commenced its operations in the Islamic Republic of Iran in late 1994. The first ambassadors to Tbilisi and Tehran were Mr. Feraidoun Haqbeen and Mr. Jamshid Giunashvili, respectively.

1 *In February 1992, the President of the Georgian Academy of Sciences, Mr. Tamaz Gamkrelidze was invited to attend anniversary celebrations of the Islamic Revolution, who was yielding the power of attorney of the then-government, and a senior official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Mr. Bahram Kazemi signed the **first bilateral document** in Tehran - a Memorandum between the Republic of Georgia and the Islamic Republic of Iran on the Principles of Establishing Relations and Economic and Cultural Cooperation.*

Following the restoration of Georgia's independence and the establishment of diplomatic relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran, the affiliation between the two countries in the political, trade, economic, scientific and cultural spheres was progressing with relative intensity- thanks in part to external factors. In bilateral political and economic relations, Georgia and to a lesser degree Iran were obligated to consider the interests of their more significant and weighty strategic partners.

The Iran-Georgia bilateral relations should be defined by several significant factors, namely:

- The Islamic Republic of Iran was one of the first to recognize Georgia's independence, open an embassy in Tbilisi and continue to offer unconditional support to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia.
- High-level visits to the Islamic Republic of Iran were conducted by Georgia's Head of State Eduard Shevardnadze (1993) and President Mikheil Saakashvili (2004). In 1995, President of Iran Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani paid an official visit to Tbilisi.
- In the 90s, government officials frequently visited Tbilisi and Tehran, especially Ministers of Foreign Affairs (Chikvaidze, Menagharishvili, Bezhuashvili, Vashadze from Georgia and Velayati, Kharazi, Mottaki from Iran). A bilateral intergovernmental economic commission was established and launched, with sessions regularly held in both capitals.²
- During the Russia-Georgia War in August 2008, the Islamic Republic of Iran remained loyal to its slogan of the 1979 Islamic Revolution: "Neither East nor West, but the Islamic Republic." Despite serious pressure from Russia, it did not support Russian military expansion into Georgia, nor did it recognize the so-called "South Ossetian" and Abkhazian "independent states."³

2 *The current president of Iran, Mr. Hassan Rouhani, visited Georgia twice, first in the capacity of First Deputy Speaker of the Islamic Consultative Assembly-Iranian Parliament (1995), and subsequently as the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council (2001).*

3 *The Iranians limited themselves to a balanced statement, calling for the cessation of hostilities, and sent humanitarian aid to the residents' city of Gori.*

- After only a few weeks following the termination of the active phase of the 2008 Russia-Georgia War, the then-Minister of Foreign Affairs of Iran, Mr. Manouchehr Mottaki, visited Tbilisi (following completion of visits to Moscow and Berlin), in order to “identify new foreign policy approaches and priorities towards the South Caucasus”, which may have been perceived as an expression of solidarity to Georgia.
- The Islamic Republic of Iran was the first to take initiative and render a government decision granting visa-free entry to Georgian citizens without preconditions. In November 2010, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the two countries signed an agreement in Tbilisi on bilateral visa-free travel.⁴
- Accordingly, in 2011-2013, the influx of Iranian tourists to Georgia significantly increased and numerous Iranian companies were founded. Many Iranian nationals obtained residency permits in Georgia, while some even acquired citizenship. An Iranian cultural center opened in Tbilisi and the Consulate General of Iran resumed operations in Batumi.
- During the severe energy crises in December 1994 and February 2006, the Islamic Republic of Iran made a political decision to supply natural gas to Georgia on both occasions, and by doing so it somewhat countered Russian interests in the region.
- The Iranian side systematically funded study trips to Iran for Georgian school and university students, teachers and scholars of Iranian studies.⁵
- The following factors hindered the deepening of cooperation between Iran and Georgia:
- During the tenures of the Presidents of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Mohammad Khatami, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Hassan Rouhani (2004-2016), high-level visits between the two countries no longer

4 *It must be taken into account that, at the time, relations between Tehran and Tbilisi had significantly cooled due to the detention on Georgian territory (in September 2007) of an Iranian national, Amir Hossein Ardebili and his subsequent extradition to the United States (January 2008).*

5 *At the same time, Iran also funded tuition and accommodation fees in theological seminaries (madrasas) in the city of Qom for ethnic Azerbaijani citizens of Georgia who were followers of Shia Islam.*

took place (during this period, high-level exchange visits with neighboring Armenia and Azerbaijan were carried out several times however).

- The accelerated extradition of Iranian national Amir Hossein Ardebili to the United States (in January 2008, the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs Manouchehr Mottaki specifically linked the resolution of this issue with his attendance at President Saakashvili's inauguration) led to a significant cooling of Iranian-Georgian political relations, which was reflected in the operations of the Georgian Embassy in Tehran.
- Subsequent to the imposition of Western sanctions on Iran due to the non-transparency of its nuclear program, Georgia also proceeded to freeze the bank accounts of Iranian companies and depositors suspected of money-laundering, causing collateral damage for many ordinary Iranians. This was followed by unilateral termination of Georgia's visa-free agreement with Iran as of 1 July 2013 (enacted, notably, a few days before the inauguration of the new President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Mr. Hussein Rouhani).

These moves by the Georgian government elicited a sharply negative response among Iranian official circles, experts and regular citizens. However, Tehran did not take retaliatory actions and retained the visa-free regime for Georgian citizens. *In recent months, the situation has significantly improved following the launch of the electronic visa system in Georgia.*

Today's Iranian-Georgian bilateral relations developed against the background of the international controversy around the Iranian nuclear program, as well as the economic sanctions imposed against the Islamic Republic of Iran by the United States, the European Union and the United Nations- proving to be no easy task for the Georgian government. Georgia formally aligned with the UN sanctions against Iran, although this no longer had a significant impact on the already "cooled" bilateral relations.

Tensions surrounding the Iranian nuclear program were defused with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) stipulated in Vienna in 2015 (on 20 July, the UN Security Council adopted a Resolution, which placed the Iranian nuclear enrichment program under international monitoring), and, correspondingly, the possible lifting of UN, US, and EU economic sanctions against Iran, thus bearing new prospects for bilateral relations with Georgia.

It should be noted that, prior to the completion of talks around the Iranian nuclear program, political will was voiced to raise bilateral relations to a new level during high-level meetings (among them, the meeting of the Prime Minister of Georgia with the President of Iran in the format of the UN General Assembly).

Accordingly, a series of events and visits were held in the period from 2014-2015:

- The Fifth Session of the Joint Commission of Cooperation between Georgia and Iran in the area of international ground shipping (2014);
- Visit of the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Iran Mr. Ebrahim Rahimpour to Tbilisi (5 March 2014);
- Visit of the delegation of the Chamber of Commerce of Iran (September 2014);
- Exchange visits of the Georgia-Iran and Iran-Georgia Parliamentary Friendship Groups in Georgia (2014);
- Visit of the Deputy Minister of Energy of Georgia to Tehran (November 2014);
- Visit of the Chairman of Parliament of Georgia Mr. David Usupashvili to Iran (January 2015);
- Visit of the Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia (Prime Minister of Georgia as of 2016), Mr. Giorgi Kvirikashvili to Tehran (18-19 May 2015). Within the framework of this recent visit, a session of the Intergovernmental Economic Commission also took place.

Despite the fact that Georgia's and Iran's political orientations may greatly vary from one another - Georgia has embarked on a path towards European integration with the prospect of NATO membership, while the Shia Islamic Republic of Iran, as a state with regional influence, has its own political interests in terms of its immediate neighbors, as well as with the US and the West - there has never existed and still is no incompatibility between the two countries that could spur serious opposition to the development of mutually beneficial bilateral cooperation. The full materialization of the existing potential for Iran-Georgia relations in trade, economic

and especially energy, transport and communication (transit) spheres, will be profitable and beneficial for both parties.

The signing of the “Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement” (DCFTA) by Georgia and the EU and the possibility for major investment in Georgia creates positive opportunities for our partners, including the business community of the Islamic Republic of Iran, to consider introducing joint products to the EU market.

Unfortunately, the current state of rapid change in the political situation of the extremely tense and unpredictable Middle Eastern region continues to call for moderate policies from the Government of Georgia towards Iran, as the potential for a discord of interests among Georgia’s allies, partners or neighbors with the Islamic Republic of Iran is not yet fully clear.