

GEORGIAN-IRANIAN RELATIONS IN THE POST-SOVIET PERIOD

Nugzar TER-OGANOV

*Researcher
at the Yad Ben Tsvi Institute
(Jerusalem, Israel)*

From time immemorial, the diversity of Georgian-Iranian relations has been expressed not only in wars and victories, but also in close trade and economic relations and in cultural interaction, including in the linguistic sphere. Despite the fact that contacts between these peoples were overshadowed by the cruelty of Aga Mohammad-khan Kajar, who in May 1795, plundered and destroyed Tbilisi, the Georgians, with their characteristic tolerance, bore no malice to the Iranians as a whole.

In 1801, Georgia joined Russia, as a result of which bilateral Georgian-Iranian relations were interrupted for essentially 200 years. Only after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the formation of an independent Georgia did the opportunity present itself to think about restoring former contacts. The initiator of this process was the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). It was among the first states to officially recognize Georgia's independence. (It should be noted that on the eve of the U.S.S.R.'s collapse, the Soviet press scared Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan striving to achieve the national independence with the likelihood of an Iranian threat.¹) Among other things, Iran recognized Georgia's territorial integrity, which laid the foundation for a constructive dialog.

At the first stage, contacts were established in the trade and economic sphere, which in the situation in which Georgia found itself was the most urgent problem. For example, in 1992, the first IRI industrial trade fair was held in Tbilisi, and Georgia took part in the traditional International Industrial Fair organized in Tehran. Then improvements were designated in the development of cultural relations, which was expressed in an increase in the number of exchange visits and in the rank of their participants. It should be noted that these states do not have any territorial claims against each other or disputed political interests, that is, even "at the outset" relations between them can be considered "cloudless,"² and there are also good prerequisites for the further development of cooperation.

A significant milestone in the history of bilateral relations was the visit by then Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze to Iran at the beginning of 1993. The documents signed during this visit formed a legal foundation on which further development of Georgian-Iranian cooperation was based. Quite a large role in this was played by the meeting between Eduard Shevardnadze (when he was U.S.S.R. foreign minister) and leader of the Islamic revolution Ayatollah Rukholla Khomeini, which took place several years prior to this.³

¹ See: *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, 25 December, 1990, p. 2.

² See: R. Khotin, *Iran kak chlen SNG, Zerkalo nedeli*, 3 February, 2004.

³ See: *Literaturuli Sakartvelo*, 19-26 February, 1999 (in Georgian).

In 1994, after the IRI embassy opened in Tbilisi, the Georgian embassy began functioning in Tehran. And a return visit by Iranian President Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani in April 1995 to Georgia made a significant contribution to intensifying political consultations and drawing up joint economic projects and ways to implement them. Iran showed an interest in creating a trans-Caucasian transportation corridor, investing in the Georgian economy, and further developing trade relations.⁴

Visits by the foreign ministers and other meetings at the highest and medium levels became a regular phenomenon, including between the regional leaders of Iran and Georgia. Intensification of diplomatic contacts made it possible to sign a trilateral agreement (Georgia, Iran, Armenia) on combating illicit drug circulation during an official visit by the Iranian foreign minister, Kamal Kharrazi, to Tbilisi in June 1999. In Georgian political circles, this document was evaluated as an important step toward developing regional cooperation.⁵

But despite the efforts to develop trade and economic contacts and step up the activity of the mixed Iranian-Georgian economic commission (although in 1996-1999 it did not hold a single meeting), as well as attempts to attract Iranian investments to the Georgian economy (although Georgia did not have any laws protecting foreign investments) and the creation of joint ventures, many projects could not be implemented. Among them we will note the joint production of low-tonnage cargo trucks based on the production capacities of the Kutaisi Kolkheti automobile factory and the Iranian Saipa automobile corporation, and the construction of a freight terminal at the Black Sea port of Poti. The same can be said of relations between Georgian scientific institutes and Iranian production complexes, a cooperation project between Gruzenergo and the Iranian state Sanair company, which envisaged repair and restoration of a water supply tunnel at the Zhinvali hydropower station, and joint production of motorized units, deliveries of manganese ore from Chiatura for a metallurgical complex in Iran, import from Iran of fireproof brick, and many other plans. The interest of the Iranian side in developing contacts with enterprises of the Georgian chemical, metallurgical, and textile industry, as well as in such a field of agriculture as tea growing, did not find any practical application. An attempt to establish close trade and economic relations between individual regions of both countries also proved unproductive.⁶ According to a statement by Iran-report, the main items of Georgian export were deliveries of ferromanganese, chemicals, minerals, and agricultural fertilizers.⁷ However, as became known from foreign information sources, as early as the beginning of the 1990s, right after the collapse of the U.S.S.R., Georgia sold Iran several dozen SU-25 Soviet-made fighter planes. Apparently at that time, Tehran recruited specialists from the Tbilisi aviation plant to service them.⁸ But this was not the end of the little-known page of Georgian-Iranian relations, which was hidden from prying eyes. For example, according to a document of the Georgian state chancellery for 1997, Iran bought components of a Georgian nuclear reactor. What is more, according to an article in *Science* magazine, by taking advantage of the unclaimed potential of Georgian physicists (similar to what took place throughout the entire former U.S.S.R.), representatives of Iran's university circles were able to recruit several of them for their nuclear projects. For example, several employees of Tbilisi State University were offered a one-two-year contract with a monthly wage of \$1,000.

According to the same source, as early as July 1997, at least 30 Georgian nuclear scientists were working at the Iranian nuclear complex, which was later confirmed by academician G. Kharadze, the director of the Georgian Academy of Sciences' Institute of Physics.⁹ What is more, several employees of the Sukhumi Institute of Physics and Technologies were working in Iran.¹⁰ At the beginning of January 2003, Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze also officially acknowledged the fact that there were Georgian scientists in Iran, including nuclear physicists, as well as aviation engineers, but even

⁴ See: *Rezonansi*, 10-11 March, 1995 (in Georgian).

⁵ See: *Kavkasioni*, 15-21 December, 1999 (in Georgian).

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ See: Iran-report, 1999.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ See: "Georgian Nuclear Scientists Working in Iran," *Rosbalt*, 17 February, 2003.

earlier he let the U.S. administration know about this through other channels.¹¹ (By the way, in response to this acknowledgment, the Iranian defense minister, Admiral Ali Shamhani, categorically denied the presence of Georgian scientists in Iran.¹²) According to Eduard Shevardnadze, his government was unable to bring any influence to bear on the Georgian specialists, since they were hired under private contracts. According to the president, this delicate situation had to be resolved in such a way as “not to spoil relations with Iran,” on the one hand, and remove “the legitimate concern of the Americans,” on the other.¹³

The disappearance of uranium suitable for making a nuclear bomb from the Sukhumi Institute of Physics and Technologies, as well as the disappearance in December 2002 of three containers of radioactive substances from a military base in Vasiiani, which was officially confirmed by the Georgian authorities, aroused even greater alarm in the administration of U.S. President George Bush Jr. According to a report by Associated Press, these substances could also be used to make a so-called “dirty bomb.”¹⁴

Relations in the trade sphere were much less productive. For example, between 1996 and 1999, the annual trade turnover between these states did not exceed 10-12 million dollars, for several reasons. They included the unsophistication of the banking and customs systems of both countries, the political instability in the region, the absence of a legislative base for protecting foreign investments, and the lack of personal and property protection in Georgia, as well as other legal problems. But in our opinion, the main obstacle on the path to developing full-scale relations was not in the economic field, but in the political, or to be more precise, geopolitical sphere.

The thing was that Georgia paid for its desire to have complete political independence, which was manifested on the wave of provoked ultra-nationalism in the country, with the loss of two autonomous formations and increased separatism in Ajaria, as a result of which, the main transportation arteries were paralyzed. Of course, under such conditions there is no need to talk about any real prospects for developing Georgian-Iranian trade and economic cooperation. What is more, keeping in mind the coincidence of geopolitical interests between Tehran and Moscow, official Tbilisi at that time avoided being a link between Iran and Russia with all its might, seeing this as a threat to its national interests. For this very reason, the project for the trans-Caucasian pipeline being discussed at that time remained on paper. Moreover, Tehran’s intention, expressed in 1996, to finance reconstruction of the Roks tunnel that joins Georgia to Russia via Ossetia, aroused the concern of the Georgian side, since it evaluated this interest as Iran’s desire to establish a land connection with its strategic partner, i.e. Russia,¹⁵ which could also pose a threat to Georgia’s national interests.

Plans for Iran joining up with the Great Silk Road project, which proposed reviving international trade through Georgia’s Black Sea ports, also remained at the declarative level. Although Eduard Shevardnadze talked about the importance of this process in his traditional weekly radio interview on 30 December, 2002,¹⁶ and its significance was also noted during bilateral meetings at the supreme level.

Poti, Georgia’s main cargo port, held a central place in this project. This access to the Black Sea would have given Iran a great opportunity to use this very important international transit artery. And with successful implementation of this project, not only Iran, but also the countries of the Near and Middle East, Persian Gulf, Southeast Asia, as well as East Africa, could take advantage of the Persian Gulf-Black Sea artery. What is more, by using the railroad via Tabriz-Julfa, Tehran would gain an alternative route for transit shipments to Europe. But for political reasons, this plan (despite all its appeal) was doomed from the very beginning for interregional considerations. Here there is graphic evidence of an attempt to

¹¹ Ibidem.

¹² See: *Nuclear Threat Initiative*, 17 January, 2003.

¹³ *Rosbalt*, 17 February, 2003.

¹⁴ Radio Liberty, 17 February, 2003; M. Dzindzikhshvili, “Radioactive Materials Missing in Georgia,” *Associated Press*, 17 February, 2003.

¹⁵ See: *Rezonansi*, 4 November, 1996.

¹⁶ President Shevardnadze’s Weekly Radio Interview, 30 December, 2002 (on the website: Embassy of Georgia to the USA, Canada and Mexico).

make the international trade aspect hinge on political issues, particularly the Nagorny Karabakh problem. Based on its domestic concerns relating to the loss of the two autonomies, as well as with respect to the current geopolitical situation and keeping in mind the principle of analogies, Tbilisi apparently cannot recognize Nagorny Karabakh's independence, since this also ricochets back on Georgia's interests. On the other hand, the oil transportation projects on its territory have brought Tbilisi's and Baku's geopolitical interests closer together. So it was the political situation in the Southern Caucasus that proved "guilty" of preventing Iran from joining up with the international transportation network through Armenia. It is likely that, being guided by the geopolitical situation in the region and its economic interests, Turkey, as the closest neighbor of Georgia and Iran, is also interested in this project remaining on paper. (It should not be forgotten that during the Iranian-Iraqi war of 1980-1988, Turkey permitted Iran to transport freight to Europe and back through its territory, which at that time significantly padded out its budget.)

Thus in the current geopolitical situation in the Southern Caucasus any attempts by Iran to join the Great Silk Road project are doomed to failure. In particular, Tehran and Tbilisi were unable to come to a consensus on the use of the port capacities in Poti. Georgia asked Iran to participate in a joint venture, but Iran, not wishing to burden itself with extra concerns, tried to buy (or at least rent for an extended period) part of the port grounds to build its own terminal. What is more, there was serious concern in Tbilisi's corridors of power that Tehran would use access to the Black Sea to extend its trade ties with Kiev and Moscow. And this, in the opinion of several observers, meant the possibility of smuggling Russian weapons to Iran.¹⁷ Of course, Georgia's economic instability and the policy conducted by the country's leadership at that time of constant political maneuvering between the U.S. and Russia should be added to the list of negative factors hindering development of Georgian-Iranian trade and economic cooperation.

Iranian-Georgian diplomatic relations developed much more successfully. After the establishment of diplomatic and the development of bilateral relations, there was an urgent need to create consular services. The Georgian consulate opened in Tehran in 1995, which made it possible to begin and strengthen contacts in tourism. At the first stage, this vector was extremely unilateral, since it was oriented toward Iran. But such trips can only provisionally be called tourism, since they were so-called shuttle business tours, which included all the CIS countries at that time. In turn, in search of commercial happiness, small and medium businessmen and merchants began coming to Georgia. Stores were opened in Tbilisi and other regions of the country, in which Iranian goods were sold, mainly products of the light and food industry. The same goods also appeared on the flea markets.

Whereas trade and economic cooperation was based on only a few industrial trade fairs organized by the sides over a certain amount of time, relations in science and culture proved more propitious. In 1994, a Georgian-Iranian Society for Scientific-Cultural Relations and Cooperation was organized in Tbilisi, and in 1995, the Georgia-Iran Friendship Society was created. What is more, scientific contacts were established between the universities of both countries, practical courses for Georgian students and Oriental studies professors were organized in Iran's higher learning establishments, and cultural contacts were expanded. Interest in each other's cultural past is a historical tradition, which promoted a high level of development of Iranian studies as a scientific branch in Georgia.¹⁸

As already noted, bilateral relations on the whole are stable and based on compromise. In addition to the lack of common borders, several political observers believe the reason for this is the lack of economic antagonism in the Southern Caucasus between Tehran and Tbilisi. But, in our opinion, despite these important factors, in the near future, Georgian-Iranian relations will be extremely limited. This is caused not so much by the geopolitical situation in the region, as by the geopolitical opposition between the U.S. and Russia in the Caucasus, along with Tbilisi's cultural-political orientation toward the West. There is no doubt that the future of Georgian-Iranian relations entirely depends on the state and quality of American-Iranian relations, although the level of American-Russian contacts may also have a big impact on the situation.

¹⁷ See: *Rezonansi*, 4 November, 1996.

¹⁸ See: D. Giunashvili, "Iranian Studies in Georgia," *Nashr-e danesh*, 1374 (1995), pp. 17-28 (in Persian).

The presence of a large contingent of military advisors from the United States in Georgia and the signing by the U.S. and this republic (as by other South Caucasian states) of a military treaty and treaty on cooperation in security, as well as Georgia's desire to become a member of NATO, are arousing Tehran's serious concern.¹⁹ The tour by Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi in 2003 of the South Caucasian countries was essentially an attempt not to permit further strengthening of America's influence in the region. But despite the assurances expressed at the time by the sides that Georgian-Iranian economic relations must be enhanced, and Eduard Shevardnadze's call to liven up the work of the joint economic commissions and expand cooperation in all other fields, including transportation, culture and education, no major changes in bilateral contacts occurred.

Probably the change in power in Georgia, which took place at the end of 2003, will have a certain influence on the development of Georgian-Iranian relations. At a press conference held in Moscow in February 2004, the republic's new president, Mikhail Saakashvili, stated: "Georgia intends to establish closer and warmer relations with Iran." According to a report by the Novosti-Georgia Information Agency, he also noted: "We have good relations with Iran, but we would like them to be even better."²⁰ As we know, Tbilisi and Tehran have already begun reforming the bilateral intergovernmental commission on economic issues.²¹

But it is unlikely that Georgian-Iranian cooperation in scientific-technical and economic trade fields will develop in the near future, particularly after the so-called "Revolution of Roses." This cooperation arouses the concern of the U.S. and the West as a whole, due to Tehran's nuclear program and the American-Iranian confrontation on many problems of international policy, both regional and global. Despite all the tenseness in relations with Russia, instead of the policy of cautious balancing between Washington and Moscow previously carried out by Eduard Shevardnadze, now Georgia is unreservedly giving preference to its orientation toward the West.

¹⁹ See: H. Peimani, "Iran Fights to Loosen America's Noose," *Middle East*, 1 May, 2003.

²⁰ Novosti-Georgia Information Agency, 12 February, 2004.

²¹ *Ibidem*.