

External Factors Affecting the Failure of Iran-Georgia Relations

Elaheh Kolaee*

Professor of Central Eurasian issues, Faculty of Law and political Sciences, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran

Masoud Rezaee

Assistant professor of Central Eurasian Researches, Faculty of Law and political Sciences, University of Tehran

Received: 2016/05/21 Accepted: 2017/06/12

Extended Abstract

Introduction

The article examines the limits of Iranian foreign policy in Georgia and outlines the threats from the US and other regional players such as Russia, Turkey and Israeli. This study also attempts to identify the main causes and motivations for Tehran's affiliation with Tbilisi. Since regaining its independence two decades ago, Georgia, a small weak state, has developed close relations with Iran in order to compensate for its weaknesses. In contrast, Iran is a mighty regional power playing important role in the Middle East, although its influence over South Caucasus is smaller and unsteady. The South Caucasus, as a source of both opportunity and threat occupies a major place in Iran's multiregional foreign policy agenda. After disregarding the Caucasus for decades and being excluded from its geopolitical chess game, Iran decided to cultivate a new relationship with the South Caucasus, including Georgia to regain its omnipotent role as a regional power. Addition to US factor, this is partly due to the main regional powers in South Caucasus, Russia, Turkey and Israel that create problems for Iran in bolstering its position in relations with Georgia. However, Georgia is the only South Caucasian country, which has no border with Iran; and this geographical factor has affected relations between the two countries over more than last two decades. Thus, after historic nuclear deal, "the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action" in Vienna on July 14, 2015 between Iran and the P5+1, now is growing optimism in Iran and the West. This is an excellent time to review the Georgian-Iranian relations to assess its likely future direction.

Methodology

This paper has been performed as a field and analytical-descriptive study and has also been analyzed by "Realism theory" in Persian and English resources. The authors of the analysis have addressed, in detail, the opportunities for economic and other forms of partnership with Iran. This will help diversify Georgia's neighborhood policy and make balancing in the interests of regional players in the South Caucasus. Finally, the possible opportunity for Iran and Georgia that might accompany such a political strategy are discussed as well. The final goal of this

* Corresponding Author, Email: ekolaee@ut.ac.ir

document is maximum detection of the potential for improving Georgia-Iran relations and its in-depth analysis, as well as opening a space for discussion and debate on Georgia-Iran relations.

Results and discussion

Georgia has had longstanding ties with Iran, regardless of both countries constantly changing political dynamics. The strained relations of Iran with the US and several other factors have prevented close cooperation between Iran and Georgia.

One of the most important reasons that hampered the relations of these countries was initially Georgia's obvious course toward the West and its impact on Georgia's decision making. From Iran's point of view, having close ties with the country that has more contacts with its enemies, appeared to be a factor that hindered the relations. Iran had constantly a fear that the US might have used its power to use Georgia as a bridge-head against Iran. The Iranian side was concerned about its relations with the little South Caucasian country. Therefore, Georgian integration with the West, and more specifically its intention to join NATO, has made Iran very nervous. Worsening relations between Iran and the West, and the maintenance of sanctions have had a negative impact on Iranian-Georgian relations. As a result, Georgia cancelled a free visa regime with Iran in 2013 due to some pressure from the West. Iran is very prudent when it comes to its relations with Georgia, as far as the Iranian political establishment is not willing to be affected by United States' increased influence. This fear is expected to be diminished when Iran's relations with Western countries gradually becomes less harsh.

On the other hand, from a Russian perspective, improved Iran-Georgian relations will harm the Kremlin's strategic interests in south Caucasus, given that the Russian Federation is seeking the absolute hegemonic position in the region and perceives the third party's increased influence in a negative light. Iran is able to become an alternative energy source for Georgia. Therefore, it takes credit in decreased energy dependence on Russia. Diversifying energy import sources is a matter of pivotal importance for Tbilisi in its current volatile geopolitical landscape. According to some information in 2013, Russian lobbyists played an essential role in exaggerating Georgia-Iran economic relations in the West.

Showing more interest in the region stems in the fact that Turkey, one of the opponents of Iran, increased its influence and potential in the region and Georgia. But Iran's ability to serve as an important balancing force of Russia and Turkey in Georgia is prevented by geography. In contrast with the other two countries, there is no direct border between Georgia and Iran. Consequently, in parallel with intensification of relations of Georgia with Iran, it is possible for Russia and Turkey to enhance their impact in terms of Soft power, intensifying special services and their impacts on certain political processes. The Georgian authorities must be prepared to meet these challenges.

The issue of Israel should be considered in the same context. Israel has a long-standing partnership with Georgia mainly in the sphere of defense. Officials in Tel Aviv openly criticize the nuclear agreement and believe that Tehran is the biggest threat to its statehood. Therefore, it should be taken into account that Georgia's interests towards the Jewish state may be sacrificed to Tbilisi's close ties with Tehran.

Georgian-Iranian relations to some extent have been improved since the P5+1 countries and Iran signed a nuclear agreement in July 2015. Therefore, the Georgian government decided to broaden the spectrum of its foreign policy by coming up to Iran. For Iran, gaining an influence on the South Caucasus is one of the top foreign priorities so as to settle in the region as the powerful actor. The main obstacle of achieving its intentions is the West's politics towards Iran, sanctioning its economic activities, and halting its growing potential. Intensifying relations with Georgia seemed prolific for Iran in such circumstances. Thus, the main interest of Iran in the

Georgia could be defined as follows: to reduce the influence of outside powers, the US and Turkey, and Israel, as a security threat. This would reduce Iran's perceived security concerns and give Tehran more space to increase its own influence.

Conclusion

Iran's foreign policy towards Georgia is essentially a pragmatic one, shaped by realpolitik, historical experiences and balance-of-power calculations. Thus, Tehran may be eager to assert itself as a regional power, it is able to acknowledge the limitations of its own capacity and the constraint of external challenges by regional players (Russia, Turkey and Israel) and trans-regional powers such as United States. Therefore, its regional policy is relatively cautious and balanced. Regional stability and security is of particular importance and have often taken precedence over the ideological preoccupations in Iran's policy choices in the South Caucasus, inherent to a revolutionary and religious behavior. It means that, Tehran's policy is not aimed at Westernization in the region, but rather to keep the South Caucasus from becoming a base for U.S. and Israel military power. Iran pursues a stability-based foreign policy, albeit one that promotes its own economic and strategic objectives and expands its own regional influence. The JCPOA gives a new chance for establishment of good relations between the two countries. The Georgian side has already started to talk about the imports of natural gas from Iran. On May 2015 Iran and Georgia signed a memorandum of understanding after a meeting of the Bilateral Cooperation Commission, the first of its kind in the last ten years. Both sides are interested in common projects related to education, tourism, transport and, most importantly, the energy sector. Iran views Georgia as a transit country, which could bring its goods to Europe. There is no doubt that even after JCPOA, US-Iranian hostility and Russia, Turkey and Israel factors still will poison bilateral relations between Tehran and Tbilisi.

Keywords: Iran, Georgia, US, South Caucasus, Russia, energy, Turkey, Israel, JCPOA.