

GEORGIAN-ISRAELI RELATIONS IN THE POST-SOVIET PERIOD

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Abstract

This article analyses the relations between Georgia and the State of Israel after collapse of USSR. The purpose of writing this article is to identify the factors affecting the relations between Georgia and Israel and to periodize the relations from a historical and political point of view. Systematic and content analysis methods were mainly used during the research, and relations between the two states were comprehensively analysed for the first time. Analysing the dynamics suggests a substantial opportunity for both states, and they mutually see the benefit of leveraging these ties in the near future. Strengthening relations between Georgia and Israel not only enhances regional security but also fosters collaboration.

Keywords: relations, Israel, Georgia, security, affecting factors

Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, South Caucasus republics, which regained their independence, became new actors in the system of international relations. Various states actively started to establish relations with these republics in order to secure their interests in the South Caucasus. Israel, which is a prominent state in the Middle East in terms of both its state structure and foreign policy principles, has serious security interests in the South Caucasus, even though it is not a geographical neighbour to the countries of the region. Because the Islamic Republic of Iran, which constantly threatens the existence of the State of Israel in the Middle East, borders two republics of the South Caucasus - Azerbaijan and Armenia - from the north. In this regard, not only Azerbaijan and Armenia, but also Georgia took an important place in the New Containment Strategy implemented by the State of Israel against Iran. In addition, Israel solves its problems related to energy security through the South Caucasus republics - Azerbaijan and Georgia. If Azerbaijan is a source country for the purchase of crude oil for Israel, Georgia is one of the two transit countries for the export of hydrocarbon resources to the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Considering all this, it is necessary to study the South Caucasus policy of the State of Israel. In order fully understanding the South Caucasus policy of this state, its relations with individual republics should be studied. From this point of view the study of relations between Georgia and the State of Israel is relevant. It should be noted that despite the fact that 32 years have passed since the declaration of independence of Georgia, and the diplomatic relations between Israel and this country have existed since 1992, the number of research works in this

direction is not very large.

One of his articles published in 2008, Professor Robert O. Friedman of Baltimore Hebrew University and John Hopkins University in the USA studied the effects of Russian-Georgian war (2008) on Israel and Middle Eastern countries. Here, the main focus is not on Georgia-Israel relations, but on the mutual security fears of Israel and Russia. (Freedman, 2008, pp. 184-185) Mark N. Katz, professor of George Mason University, in an article published in the same year, talked about the consequences of the Georgia crisis for Israel, Iran and the West. The author further examines Israel's and Iran's responses to the crisis, as well as its broader implications for regional energy and security concerns (Katz, 2008). Augusta University professor Mikhail Bishku's article entitled "South Caucasus Republics and Israel" also attracts attention in this regard. The article focuses on the relations of the three republics (Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia) with Israel that emerged in the South Caucasus after the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War. In his work, Bishku discussed the migration of Jews from the Caucasian countries to Israel, the level of anti-Semitism in these countries, and Israel's ability to influence regional processes (Bishku, 2009).

In the analysis, written by A. Clayton for "Caspian Policy Centre", the steps taken by Georgia to deepen relations with Israel in the field of defence were studied. The author focused on the events and processes that took place in 2008-2020. Richard Rousseau, in his article, paid more attention to the development level and prospects of relations in the political and economic spheres. He also analysed the reasons that caused tension in the relations between the two states in different years. It increases the importance of the author's research, allows take into account the factors that can have a negative impact on the future of relations between Georgia and the State of Israel (Clayton, 2020).

The article, written by Roie Yellinek a researcher from Israel, on Georgia's relations with Israel and the U.S. is one of the works that directly aims to study the relations between the two countries (Yellinek , 2020).

The Iranian researchers Elahe Koolayi and Masoud Rezaei published an article on Iran-Georgia relations in 2008 and mentioned Israel's policy in Georgia as one of the external factors influencing the relations. (کولایی & رضائی, 1396)

Relations between Georgia and the state of Israel have attracted the attention of a number of authors from Russia. Sergey Markedonov, an employee of the Department of International Relations Problems of the Russian Institute of Political and Military Analysis, studied the priorities of the Caucasus policy of the Israeli state. Analysing the priorities of the Georgian policy of the State of Israel, he came to the conclusion that Israel is interested in opening the "Gate to the Caucasus" no matter what. The author claimed that the "Greater Middle East" concept, of which Israel is one of the authors, seems to have ceased to be just a theory, and the Caucasus has an important place in this plan (Маркедонов, 2023).

Victoria Sergienko's article analysed Georgian-Israeli relations after the collapse of the USSR. The advantage of the work is that the author used a lot of archival documents. V. Sergienko was able to investigate in detail the evolution of trade and economic cooperation with the participation of the Jewish diaspora in Georgia, as well as the formation and development of relations in the cultural field (Сергиенко, 2016).

The analysis, written by Nasiba Mirzayeva for the International Relations Analysis Centre in August 2023, called "Overview of Georgia-Israel relations" is still one of the rare works written in this field. It can be considered one of the first attempts to determine the phase division of Georgia-Israel relations (Mirzayeva, 2023).

The purpose of writing this article is to identify the factors affecting the relations between

Georgia and Israel and to periodize the relations from a historical and political point of view.

Systematic and content analysis methods were mainly used during the research, and relations between the two states were comprehensively analysed for the first time.

Factors affecting relations

Georgia and the State of Israel share several similar characteristics. One notable commonality is that, just as Israel stands as the sole state created in the Middle East for Jews worldwide, Georgia is the exclusive homeland for all Georgians around the globe.

Another shared aspect between Israel and Georgia is that both are geographically situated in the Asian continent, yet their values and political systems are predominantly aligned with Europe. However, the manifestation of European values in these two countries has been influenced by different factors. In the case of the State of Israel, this is primarily linked to a significant portion of its population having migrated from European countries, making them carriers of European values to a considerable extent. As for Georgia, its geographical location serves as the meeting point from which Europe extends towards Asia. Georgians have long played a role as conveyors of European values to the Caucasus region.

In the context of their geopolitical locations, both states having close relations with the U.S. are noteworthy. According to S. Markedonov, strategic partnership with the U.S. is a priority for Georgia, while Israel stands as one of the U.S.'s most consistent military and political allies (Маркедонов, 2023). This alignment between Georgia and Israel converges their positions. On the other hand, Georgia's cautious approach toward the U.S. and Israel is conditioned by Iran, which, having declared a staunch opposition to the U.S. and Israel in its foreign policy, influences Georgia's stance.

Both Georgia and Israel, strategically located along the coastlines of vital water basins, hold significant importance for the region. The geostrategic position of Israel on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea is quite comparable to Georgia's position along the Black Sea. Israel is situated in Western Asia, between the southeast shores of the Mediterranean and the northern shores of the Red Sea. In its region, Israel occupies crucial transportation routes for neighboring states to access seas and the ocean. Similarly, Georgia situated along the Black Sea coast, shares similar characteristics with its access to vital transportation routes for countries in the Caucasus and Central Asia regions.

The State of Israel consistently faces pressures from Muslim Arab states in the Middle East and non-Arab Iran, while Georgia experiences pressures primarily formulated by the Russian Federation. Territorial disputes among countries neighboring Israel have fluctuated in intensity since the post-World War II era. Syria, Lebanon, and the Palestinian Authority assert claims over territories controlled by Israel. The proximity of Israel's relations with Georgia has, at times, led to certain actions by Syria towards Georgia. Notably, in certain periods, Syria took steps related to its stance on Georgia, recognizing illegal and so-called independence "South Ossetia" and Abkhazia. It is worth mentioning that in 2008, the president of Syria expressed support for Russia's position in the Abkhazia conflict. In 2013, separatists from Abkhazia sent their first representatives to Syria. The leader of the separatist of Abkhazia, Raul Khajimba, declared in November 2016 that they supported Syria in the "fight against international terrorism". After the beginning of the civil war in Syria, the separatist government of Abkhazia endorsed the remigration of individuals who had previously migrated from these territories to Syria and supported the settlement of around 500 Syrians of Abkhaz origin in Abkhazia. (Aryutaa & Martirosyan, 2019) In May 2018, the Syrian government recognized the separatist regime as an "independent state". Following this, Georgia severed its relations with Syria.

In contrast to Syria, Israel's official stance on separatist entities within Georgia's territory is clear and unequivocal. The State of Israel openly declared its recognition of Georgia's territorial integrity.

The establishment of diplomatic relations between Israel and Georgia on June 1, 1992, was influenced by numerous factors that have also shaped the nature of these relations.

The first factor influencing the relations between Israel and Georgia is the long historical connection between the Georgian and Jewish peoples. The history of the Jewish community in Georgia is quite ancient, dating back to the 8th century BC when, according to historical sources, Jews began to settle in Mtskheta. The second wave of Jewish migration occurred after the Jewish-Roman wars, specifically when Babylonian ruler Nebuchadnezzar II captured Jerusalem in 587 BC, leading to the expulsion of Jews. In Georgia, a distinct group known as "Georgian Jews" resides, emphasizing the uniqueness of their presence. This historical context shapes the multifaceted relationship between the two nations. The historical event following the Babylonian captivity, as presented in the work "Kartlis Tsoxovreba", contradicts the notion of Jews settling near the Aragvi River (Mirzayeva, 2023, p. 3). According to some sources, the group referred to as Georgian Jews specifically migrated to Georgia in the 6th century BC during the Babylonian captivity, marking one of the oldest accounts in Georgian historical sources. Georgian Jews exhibit distinctive characteristics different from Ashkenazis. The mass settlement of Ashkenazis in Georgia mainly occurred after Georgia's annexation by Russia. Following the dissolution of the USSR, a significant migration wave led the majority of Georgian Jews to currently reside in Israel, with approximately 60,000 individuals in the 1970s primarily moving to the United States, the Russian Federation, and Belgium (particularly Antwerp).

According to Georgia's first national census in 2002, 3,541 Jews were recorded as practicing their religion. In a 2008 article by Iranian researchers Koolayi and Rezayi, it was claimed that over 12,000 Georgian Jews, primarily in the city of Gori, currently reside in Georgia (945 (كولايي & رضائي, 1396, ص. 945). As a result of the 2008 Russian-Georgian War, around 200 Georgian Jews had immigrated to Israel with the assistance of the Jewish Agency. By 2014, the number of Georgian Jews had decreased to approximately 1,500. The primary residential area for this community in Israel is the city of Ashdod. Several authors characterize the presence of the Jewish community in contemporary Georgia as a positive factor, both officially and in the collective consciousness, affirming the ethnic tolerance of Georgian society (Маркедонов, 2023). During his visit to Israel in 2013, Georgia's Prime Minister B. Ivanishvili stated:

'You are aware that the friendship between the Jewish and Georgian peoples spans more than the 26th century. We are obligated to turn this longstanding friendship into a reality by harnessing our potential, establishing an exemplary relationship between the two states that serves as a model for the entire world.' (ისრაელის და საქართველოს პრემიერ-მინისტრებმა მოლაპარაკებები გამართეს, 2013).

He later noted that the Jewish people in Georgia are highly esteemed, and this factor positively influences the deepening of friendship relations with Israel. At that time, the level of anti-Semitism in Georgia was significantly lower compared to neighboring Armenia. For instance, in 2014, according to ADL, while the level of anti-Semitism in Armenia was %58, it was only %32 in Georgia. (Antiemitism index score. Compare Georgia and Armenia, 2023).

Recent analyses indicate changes in the situation. In mid-2018, a Jewish man named Vitali Safarov was murdered in the centre of Tbilisi based on his ethnicity. Some information sources claim that high-ranking clergy members of the Georgian Orthodox Church reached disturbing levels of anti-Semitic statements since 2020. Neither the Patriarchate of the Georgian Orthodox

Church nor the government adequately criticized and condemned these anti-Semitic statements. It is alleged that the messages from clergy members affiliated with the Georgian Orthodox Church regarding the on-going war in Ukraine often align in content with messages from the Kremlin and the Russian Patriarchate (New alarming incidents of antisemitism in Georgia , 2023). However, it should be noted that in recent years, both the government and civil society organizations in Georgia have made efforts to increase awareness about the negative consequences of anti-Semitism and promote initiatives for a more inclusive and tolerant society.

During his visit to Tbilisi in September 2023, Israeli Knesset Speaker Amir Ohana, addressing this issue, stated:

We see with concern the growth of anti-Semitism in the world, but I respectfully say that you do not see it in Georgia. In Georgia, the population and the government respect the Jewish communities and we can see that in this museum. We respect and appreciate that.' (Israeli Knesset Speaker: We “appreciate” Georgian population’s, Govt’s respect for Jewish communities, relationship between countries “getting stronger”, 2023)

Georgian Jews who migrated from Georgia to Israel, both Georgian and Ashkenazi, consider Georgia alongside Israel as their homeland. The existence of these communities positively influences relations between the two countries.

Another factor shaping relations between Georgia and the State of Israel is security. Israel is interested in ensuring the security of Georgia for various reasons. Primarily because Georgia has consistently maintained its alignment with the United States, which is Israel's closest ally in the Caucasus region. Azerbaijan, which plays a crucial role as the closest ally of the State of Israel in the region, has pursued a more independent policy, balancing its relations among geopolitical powers to safeguard its own interests. Armenia, formally regaining its independence until 2018, had essentially become a Russian outpost. Under such circumstances, the United States endeavoured to carry out its activities against Russia through Georgia. Israel, as a closest ally of the United States, supported Georgia in addressing many of its security issues. The significant importance of Georgia for the State of Israel was underscored when, on August 10, 2008, the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a unilateral statement regarding Russia's invasion of Georgia (Yellinek , 2020, p. 1).

Georgia holds a particular significance for Israel's energy security, as the Israeli state largely fulfils its demand for oil through Azerbaijan's hydrocarbon resources. According to the United Nations COMTRADE international trade database, Azerbaijan's crude oil exports to Israel amounted to USD 1.67 billion in 2022 (Azerbaijan Exports of crude oil to Israel, 2023). Azerbaijani oil, specifically passing through pipelines in Georgian territory, is transported to Turkey's Ceyhan port and subsequently to Israel via tankers. Therefore, any issues regarding security in Georgia can adversely impact the stability of oil and gas pipelines in the country, directly threatening Israel's energy security.

Another issue is associated with the strengthening of Iran's religious influence in regions of Georgia, particularly those inhabited by the Muslim population. In the initial years following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Iran successfully conducted sufficient outreach in the region, notably among Georgia's Muslim communities. 'Iranian activities in Borchali — which is a Georgian region with high concentration of Azerbaijani population — has been blatantly conspicuous since the last ten years. Iranian influence lies primarily in organizing various free training and schools, sending young people to Iran to receive religious education, publishing pro-Iranian promotional literature (part of which is sent to Azerbaijan), financing activities of various pro-Iranian organizations' (Hajizade, 2018) .

Gradually, in Georgia, the impact of Iran's activities is becoming more apparent. In this regard, it was no coincidence that during the visit of the Prime Minister of Georgia Bdzina Ivanashvili to Israel in 2013, the Prime Minister of this country, Benjamin Netanyahu, talked about the joint struggle against the threat of Iran (ისრაელის და საქართველოს პრემიერ-მინისტრებმა მოლაპარაკებები გამართეს , 2013). However, in the execution of this joint effort, both sides should take into account the position of the Republic of Azerbaijan. This is because the primary audience for Iran's propaganda within its borders consists ethnically of Azerbaijanis. In recent years, when we consider the activities of the State Committee on Religious Associations of the Republic of Azerbaijan and various organizations in Georgia, it can be stated unequivocally.

During the factors conditioning relations between Georgia and the State of Israel, it is essential to particularly emphasize the role of economic factors. Georgia and Israel have strong ties in the economic field, especially in the agricultural sector. The governments of both countries are making efforts to deepen cooperation in the agricultural sector. In 2014, after being personally invited by Shalva Pipia, Georgia's counterpart to Israel's Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Yair Shamir, his two-day visit to Tbilisi further emphasized the strengthening of relations in this field. The ministers signed an agreement to expand cooperation in the agricultural sector. The document reflected important issues related to cooperation in the field of agricultural production, food safety, veterinary, animal husbandry and poultry development, development of winemaking, as well as livestock health protection. Within the framework of cooperation, exchange programs, seminars and experiences were held in Israel for Georgian farmers in the following years (Israel, Georgia sign agriculture cooperation agreement, 2014).

Israel is selected particularly for the application of advanced irrigation systems, cutting-edge agricultural technology, and its expertise gained in this field. An analysis of relations indicates that Georgia has emerged as an interesting partner in the agricultural sector for Israel, showcasing knowledge, innovative solutions, and a keen interest in adopting technology. As a result, joint research and development projects have emerged in the field of agriculture. Attention is particularly given to the development of drought-resistant crops and more efficient irrigation systems tailored to Georgia's climate

Furthermore, Georgia has been a country of particular interest to Israeli investors. In pursuit of economic interests, Georgian governments have, at various times, incentivized Israeli investors to channel their capital into the country. In recent years, the trade volume between Georgia and Israel has been steadily on the rise. In 2022, the trade turnover increased by %22.8 compared to the preceding year. According to official statistics, the trade volume between the countries reached a record high in the last decade, totalling 46 million US dollars. The data reveals that in 2022, Georgia exported goods worth 22 million US dollars to Israel, marking a significant %5.7 increase from the previous year. On the import side, Georgia acquired products from Israel valued at 16,453,000 US dollars during the same period, indicating a remarkable %56.8 growth compared to 2021 (Trade Between Georgia And Israel Up By 22.8% , 2022).

Therefore, the study of factors influencing Georgian-Israeli relations clearly indicates that historical ties, shared security interests, common challenges arising from occupation and separatism on the territories of both countries, as well as the presence of common allies, significantly impact the political relations between the two nations.

The stages of the relations

The historical relations between Georgia and the State of Israel, starting from 1992, can be divided into three main stages chronologically. The period from 1992 to 2003, encompassing the years leading up to the 'Rose Revolution,' is characterized as the phase of establishing relations. From 2003 to 2013, the history of Israel-Georgia relations unfolds through diplomatic initiatives, economic cooperation, and increasing connections between the two countries. During this time, both countries sought to strengthen their political and economic partnerships. Since 2013, a completely new stage has begun in the relations between the two states.

As mentioned above, in 1992, there was a change of power in Georgia. After Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the new head of state, Eduard Shevardnadze, was well acquainted with the Israeli political elite. Eduard Shevardnadze had served as the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Soviet Union in the final years of the Cold War and played a significant role in political processes. It was during his tenure as the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR that substantial changes occurred in foreign policy, leading to improvements and thaw in relations with some Western states and Israel. In October 1986, the Soviet Union took steps to improve relations with Israel. Eduard Shevardnadze's activities at that time also played a certain role in establishing relations after gaining independence. As a result, in the difficult years of 1992-1993, Israel became one of the first foreign countries to open an embassy in Tbilisi and started sending humanitarian aid (food, medicine, clothing, etc.) (Сергиенко, 2016, p. 76). In October 1993, Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze welcomed the Israeli ambassador in Tbilisi, expressing gratitude for the humanitarian aid from Israel. Following a plea from A. Kadaqishvili, the deputy prime minister of Georgia, in November 1993, groups and committees were formed in Israel to collect donations. An international centre in Georgia took responsibility for organizing humanitarian assistance for migrants from Georgia.

In January 1994, Eduard Shevardnadze received a delegation consisting of representatives from the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs and various economic agencies. During the meeting, discussions were held on the current situation in Georgia and the prospects of Georgia-Israel relations (Сергиенко, 2016, p. 77).

In 1996, the Israel-Georgia Chamber of Commerce was established to support the increase in trade between Georgia and the State of Israel. However, over the years, Israel has not been able to transform into one of Georgia's leading trade partners (Yellinek , 2020).

The "Rose Revolution" in 2003 marked the beginning of a new phase in Georgian-Israel relations. During those years, in the Eurasian geopolitical landscape, Israel and Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili were considered two of the most loyal allies of the United States. Georgia had been dubbed the "Israel of the Caucasus" due to its strong alliance with the U.S. This had a positive impact on Israel-Georgia relations (Israel - Shevardnadze on state visit, 1998).

During Saakashvili's presidency, he made several official and business trips to Israel in 2004, 2006, 2008, etc. In October 2006, during one of his visits, Mikhail Saakashvili held meetings with Israeli President Moshe Katsav, Deputy Prime Minister Shimon Peres, and Knesset Speaker Dalia Itzik. He also participated in the "Transit - Global Energy and Political Trends" conference, and had discussions with representatives of Israeli business circles and the Georgian diaspora. In May 2008, Saakashvili attended the Presidents Conference organized by Israel in Jerusalem on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of its establishment. During the visit, he met with Israeli President Shimon Peres, discussing various cooperation issues in bilateral and multilateral formats (Mikheil Saakashvili met the President of Israel Shimon Peres and the President of Poland Lech Kachinski, 2008).

During this phase, relations were rapidly developing in political, economic, and military domains. Especially until 2005, Israel was providing extensive security assistance to Georgia.

Through military-technical collaboration, Israel was sending military experts to assist in the enhancement of Georgia's MiG-25 aircraft and support in training the armed forces. Israel has significant expertise in studying and improving the systems of MiG-25 aircraft. Despite being produced by the Soviet Union, MiG-25s gained their initial combat experience in 1971 as part of the Egyptian Air Force before entering service in Soviet bases. Temporarily assigned to the Egyptian Air Force by the Soviet Union, four Foxbats (MiG-25) entered Israeli airspace 20 times in pairs for reconnaissance purposes. Despite the reconnaissance authorities knowing the time and duration of the flights of these aircraft, the Israeli military did not create any obstacles. Instead, they worked towards learning the tactical and technical characteristics of these aircraft. In the years 1981-1982, Syria employed these aircraft against Israel. By that time, Israel already had sufficient information about MiG-25s. Therefore, Georgia, as a post Soviet country, seeking support from Israel for the enhancement of its MiG-25s, should not be considered a coincidence.

During those years, Israel sold a considerable amount of military equipment to Georgia, including Elbit drones, Rafael anti-tank missiles, Taas mines, and various military technologies. This response was also prompted by Russia's warm relations with Middle Eastern states holding an anti-Israel stance and non-state actors employing force. Factors such as Russia's support for HAMAS, overlooking Syria supplying anti-tank missiles to Hezbollah, and offering military and diplomatic support to Iran, especially when Iran called for the destruction of Israel, contributed to Israel strengthening its ties with Georgia (Freedman, 2008, ss. 184-185).

However, Russian pressure compelled Israel to limit its military relations with Georgia to the sale of non-offensive military equipment (Yellinek , 2020). In February 2008, the Israeli government imposed a ban on the sale of weapons and combat technology to Georgia, with the intention of avoiding a confrontation with Russia. Israel believed that such a situation could potentially strengthen Russian support for organizations opposed to Israel in Syria and other Arab countries.

In 2008, during the Russian-Georgian war, the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that Israel 'recognizes the territorial integrity of Georgia and calls for a peaceful resolution'. On August 15 of the same year, a group of Israeli citizens in Tel Aviv organized a human chain to show support for Georgia, urging the government to strengthen its backing for the country. This wasn't coincidental; on August 10, just before the war broke out, the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs had recommended to the Defence Ministry to prohibit the sale of any military equipment to Georgia. This suggestion came six months after the initial ban on selling arms and combat equipment to Georgia, leading to further restrictions on trade relations in the security sector with the country. During that period, Israeli experts wrote that Israel feared its arms sales to Georgia would be perceived by Russia as a threat to Georgia's security. They believed that Russia, in response, might change its policies by supplying high-quality weapons to Arab countries or Iran, posing a risk to Israel's military superiority (מש' הדור: להקפיא מכירת נשק ישראלי לגיאורגיה, 2008). At the time, Georgian officials initially declared that the military, equipped with Israeli weapons, had demonstrated significant resistance against Russian forces. They were striving to continue Israel's assistance in this regard. However, later on, Israel's distancing from Georgia, seemingly under Russian influence, led to certain Georgian officials expressing opinions against Israel (Katz, 2008, p. 4).

After the war, the reconstruction of Georgia's dispersed infrastructure received significant investment from Israeli entrepreneurs. As of January 2009, %35 of all government contracts in Georgia were secured by Israeli entrepreneurs. The rise in economic relations between Israel and Georgia is evident in various statistical figures. In 2003, Israel's direct investment in Georgia amounted to \$487,000, while by 2007; this figure had surpassed \$9.3 million. Concurrently,

Georgia's imports from Israel increased from \$1.7 million to \$37.7 million during the same period (Rousseau, 2011).

In 2010, Israel and Georgia signed bilateral agreements in the areas of tourism and air transportation. In October of that year, Georgia's Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development, Vera Kobalia, visited Israel with the primary goal of boosting tourist inflow between the two nations. The visit aimed at fostering information exchange, conducting marketing activities, and establishing broader cooperation with investors. The highlight was the signing of a bilateral agreement. During her meeting with Israeli investors, Minister Kobalia also extended an invitation for them to invest in Georgia's tourism sector (Friedman, 2010).

However, some differences of opinion in the subsequent period led to tensions in Georgia-Israel relations. In October 2010, two Israeli businessmen, Roni Fuchs and Zeev Frenkel, were arrested in Georgia on charges of attempting to bribe the deputy finance minister of the country. Roni Fuchs and Zeev Frenkel were found guilty of attempting to bribe the deputy finance minister and were subsequently sentenced by the Tbilisi court to seven and a half years and six years in prison, respectively. In addition to imprisonment, they were also fined significant amounts. The Georgian decision to pursue legal action in this case elicited dissatisfaction, particularly considering the longstanding invitation extended to Israeli investors. In response, Israel adjusted the timing of the planned official visit by the Chairman of the Georgian Parliament, David Bakradze, and denied a visa for Georgian Minister of Economy Vera Kobalia to attend the International Tourism Conference in Jerusalem, citing a scheduling conflict. April 7, the Israel National Security Council issued a statement advising Israeli citizens to exercise caution when traveling to Georgia, Armenia, and Tajikistan. In the period between February and April of 2011, Georgia had been included in Israel's list of hazardous countries. On April 7, the Israel National Security Council issued a statement advising Israeli citizens to exercise caution when traveling to Georgia, Armenia, and Tajikistan. During the months of February to April 2011, Georgia had been included in Israel's list of hazardous countries (Rousseau, 2011). On April 14, a delegation representing the private security advisory firm Global CST, established by retired Major General and former Chief of Operations at the Israeli General Staff, Israel Ziv, was sent to Sukhumi to meet with Sergey Shamba, the separatist Prime Minister of Abkhazia. Collaborating, even at the level of private military companies, with the separatist entity attempting to secede from the territory of Georgia was a significant message officially conveyed to Tbilisi. The initial reaction of the Georgian authorities was to summon the Israeli ambassador to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for a "detailed discussion" regarding the trip of the Global CST delegation, which provides security and military support services. The ambassador stated that his country had no intention of engaging in any military cooperation with the de facto authorities of Abkhazia (Rousseau, 2011).

Some authors argue that the escalation of tensions in relations also had an Iranian influence. Researcher James Kirchick wrote that the agreement signed between Georgia and Iran in November 2010 had lifted visa restrictions, aiming to restore direct flights between Tehran and Tbilisi (Kirchick, 2013). Iranian citizens could stay in Georgia for up to 35 days, and Georgian citizens could do the same in Iran. This facilitated the strengthening of positions for both Iran and Georgia within each other's territories. During the visa-free regime, Iran established a Consulate General in Batumi and a Cultural Centre in Tbilisi. Israel leveraged the sanctions imposed on Iran by the United States and European countries, leading to economic weakening for Iran. By signing such an agreement with Georgia, Iran aimed to turn Georgia into a gateway to European markets. It is not coincidental that, after the visa regime was lifted, Iranian companies and businessmen began opening accounts in Georgian banks, relocating to Georgia, and redirecting their

investments there. Between 2010 and 2013, the number of Iranian companies in Georgia increased from 84 to 500 (Dadaşova, Baxşiyeva, & Babyeva-Şükürova , 2018, pp. 52-53).

In 2013, a change in government occurred in Georgia. The "Georgian Dream," led by Bidzina Ivanishvili, replaced the United National Movement. Relations began to normalize in Georgia after this shift in power.

After Bidzina Ivanishvili assumed power, the relations with Israel continued to be at a notably high level. In contrast to Mikheil Saakashvili, Ivanishvili endeavoured to normalize relations not only with the United States and other Western countries but also with Russia. Furthermore, during B. Ivanishvili's administration, it was deemed essential to uphold relations with the State of Israel. In June 2013, as part of Ivanishvili's visit to Israel, a meeting between the prime ministers of both countries transpired not in Tel Aviv but in Jerusalem. In this meeting, Georgian Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili conveyed his aspiration for the relations between the two nations to be deemed "ideal" and "exemplary. Benjamin Netanyahu expressed his keen interest in expanding his country's relations with Georgia across various domains, including trade, agriculture, and cultural exchanges. He underscored the importance of establishing and strengthening humanitarian connections between the two nations, stating:

“Our beautiful Jewish community, rooted in Georgia for millennia, coexists harmoniously. Beyond that, we share a deep and enduring friendship with contemporary nations” (ისრაელის და საქართველოს პრემიერ-მინისტრებმა მოლაპარაკებები გამართეს , 2013).

In November 2013, with the aim of fostering tourism ties, a significant milestone was achieved as both countries agreed and signed a visa-free regime. The agreement, inked by Irakli Garibashvili, then Georgia's Minister of Internal Affairs and newly appointed Prime Minister, and Faina Kirschenbaum, Israel's Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs, granted Georgian citizens the opportunity to stay visa-free in Israel for up to 90 days within a six-month period for tourism or personal visits (Georgia and Israel sign visa free agreement , 2013). This reciprocal arrangement also extended these privileges to Israeli tourists visiting Georgia.

The Israeli Prime Minister underscored the pivotal role of security cooperation between both nations. Expressing a joint commitment to regional security, stability, and peace, he emphasized the imperative for a united front against challenges like Iran's calls and other regional threats. The discussions during the visit encompassed economic collaboration, defence matters, reciprocal investment promotion, and parliamentary relations. Notably, the Georgian delegation, led by Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili, included key figures such as Diaspora Affairs Minister Konstantin Surguladze, Prime Minister's Advisor Gia Khukhashvili, and the head of Georgia's National Investment Agency, Giorgi Pertaia. The delegation engaged in meetings with Yuli Edelstein, the Speaker of the Israeli Knesset, and President Shimon Peres, further solidifying diplomatic ties.

Within the delegation, Georgia's Defence Minister Irakli Alasania played a key role. Georgia aspired to renew defence contracts with Israel, seeking advanced defence weaponry like unmanned aerial vehicles, anti-tank systems, and anti-aircraft missiles. Yet, realizing these objectives in collaboration with Israel presented notable challenges for Georgia (Yellinek , 2020, p. 2).

In 2014, Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili made an official visit to Israel, marked by the inaugural session of the Israel-Georgia Joint Economic Commission. Led by Israel's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Avigdor Liberman, and Georgia's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Maia Panjikidze, the discussions during Garibashvili's visit delved into potential

collaborations in trade and the economy. The visit concluded with the signing of a memorandum of understanding by the Foreign Ministers, solidifying the framework for the Israel-Georgia economic partnership (Georgian PM Garibashvili on official visit to Israel, 2014).

During their meeting on January 28, Georgian Prime Minister Garibashvili and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu exchanged significant messages on shared concerns. Netanyahu referred to Georgia's Jewish community as a 'natural bridge' highlighting the high regard for Georgia's ambitions to forge a prosperous and secure future. Netanyahu underscored Israel's commitment to on-going collaboration with Georgia across all domains.

Prime Minister Garibashvili highlighted Georgia's interest in signing a free trade agreement with Israel. In discussing the treatment of Jews in Georgia, he placed special emphasis on addressing the issue of anti-Semitism (Georgian PM Garibashvili on official visit to Israel, 2014). During his meeting with Israeli President Shimon Peres, Irakli Garibashvili expressed the shared commitment to strengthen collaboration between the two nations.

In 2015, Georgia took a significant step by establishing an honorary consulate in Israel, specifically in the city of Jerusalem. The opening ceremony witnessed the participation of Israel's Minister of Foreign Affairs Avigdor Liberman and other high-ranking officials from the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Against the backdrop of widespread global discussions on the Jerusalem issue, Georgia's creation of an honorary consulate in the city can be viewed as a clear demonstration of support for the State of Israel.

Israeli President Reuven Rivlin embarked on a two-day official visit to Georgia, engaging in comprehensive discussions with President Giorgi Margvelashvili on bilateral and regional matters in January 2017. A central focus of these discussions with both state and government leaders was the enhancement of economic and trade relations. Georgian officials underscored the nation's liberal, stable, secure, and corruption-free business environment, positioning Georgia strategically as an appealing destination for foreign investments. President Margvelashvili specifically urged Israeli entrepreneurs to invest in Georgia, highlighting the burgeoning sectors of energy, agriculture, and tourism.

In July 2017, Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili and, later in October 2017, Parliament Speaker Irakli Kobakhidze actively contributed to fortifying the ties between Tbilisi and Tel Aviv. Kobakhidze's official visits to Israel served as clear indicators of the deepening relationship between the two nations. During his initial meeting with Tzipi Hotoveli, Israel's Deputy Foreign Minister, the discussions centred on the future prospects for enhancing existing friendships and partnerships across various domains. The emphasis was placed on the imperative of strengthening interpersonal connections and relations in key areas such as economy, education, culture, and tourism. Kobakhidze's visit also included meetings with the President of Israel, the Speaker of the Israeli Parliament, and other high-ranking officials (Georgian Parliament Speaker visits Israel , 2017).

In 2018, Defence Minister Avigdor Liberman's visit to Georgia left a lasting impact, marked by the attainment of multiple agreements aimed at elevating military and security relations to a new echelon. The official visit witnessed the signing of a document formalizing the commitment to strengthen collaboration in the defence sector between Georgia and Israel. During discussions with Georgia's Defence Minister Levan Izoria, Liberman conveyed Israel's willingness to share expertise in establishing military reserve systems and enhancing cybersecurity. After the formal meetings, Liberman visited the Mukhatgverdi Brotherhood Cemetery, paying solemn tribute to the soldiers who sacrificed their lives during the 2008 Russia-Georgia war (Israeli Defence Minister visits Georgia for the first time, 2018).

In a momentous occasion on January 23, 2020, President Salome Zurbashvili of Georgia embarked on an unprecedented official visit to Israel, etching her name in history as the first Georgian president to undertake such a visit. This significant journey coincided with the 5th World Holocaust Forum, where President Zurbashvili joined dignitaries from around the globe. During her meeting with Israeli President Reuven Rivlin, she underscored that the ties between Georgia and Israel are not merely profound and close but also steeped in history. President Zurbashvili emphasized the enduring relationship between the Jewish and Georgian peoples, spanning an impressive 26 centuries. Importantly, in 2018, the Georgian government formally recognized these 26-century-old Georgian-Jewish relations as intangible cultural heritage. Former Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili made this announcement during a special event, expressing the government's intent to seek UNESCO recognition for the unique Georgian-Jewish relations as non-material cultural heritage (Georgia Declares Georgian-Jewish relations as intangible cultural heritage , 2018).

Salome Zurbashvili's visit to Israel in January 2020 saw a pivotal meeting between the two presidents, resulting in an agreement to accelerate the signing of a legal protection accord for Georgians in Israel. President Zurbashvili was also honoured with the esteemed Sion Friends Centre's High Award for her role in establishing the Israel-Georgia Joint Cultural Office and her dedication to combating anti-Semitism in Georgia. Speaking at the Peres Peace and Innovation Centre in Tel Aviv, Zurbashvili underscored the crucial nature of collaboration with Israel in the realm of modern technologies, emphasizing its profound significance for Georgia (Georgian presidents visits Israel: 'our relations are not only deep, they are historical' , 2020).

Currently, relations between the State of Israel and Georgia are at a high level. Georgia supports Israel unequivocally when important issues for Israel are discussed at the UN, and the two countries are trying to form a free trade zone. Certainly, the recent meeting between Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in August 2023 signals the substantial importance both countries attach to their future relationship. Georgia's active support for Israel in critical matters at the United Nations underscores the strength of their diplomatic ties. Additionally, the mutual efforts to establish a free trade zone indicate a commitment to fostering economic collaboration. The prospect of negotiations on a Free Trade Agreement, slated to begin in 2024, holds significant promise for further enhancing bilateral ties and potentially boosting Israeli investments in Georgia.

Forecasting the future of Georgia-Israel relations is complex due to the dynamic nature of geopolitical, economic, and strategic factors. However, considering potential areas for collaboration and the evolving geopolitical landscape, we can explore some insights into the possible trajectory of these relations. Forecasting the future of Georgia-Israel relations remains challenging, given their dependence on evolving geopolitical, economic, and strategic factors. The dynamics could be notably influenced by events in neighboring countries like Russia, Iran, and Turkey. Moreover, the robust ties that both Israel and Georgia maintain with the

United States add another layer of complexity. Changes in U.S. foreign policy and regional priorities may exert either positive or negative effects on their interactions and relationships.

Both the State of Israel and Georgia express their interest in strengthening strategic relations with other countries. Israel seeks regional stability in the Middle East, while Georgia aims to ensure its sovereignty and territorial integrity. In the near future, the exchange of intelligence information, collaboration in counterterrorism, and the development of cooperation in cybersecurity seem to be crucial directions for both Israel and Georgia to pursue.

The signed agreements and on-going negotiations indicate the potential for substantial strides in expanding economic relations in the near future. Both countries are actively exploring

trade and investment opportunities, especially in areas such as technology, agriculture, and healthcare. Additionally, fostering cultural exchange, promoting tourism, and enhancing educational collaboration could further strengthen the bonds between their populations, thereby contributing positively to diplomatic relations.

Azerbaijan's historical friendly ties with both Israel and Georgia indicate that any diplomatic initiatives or conflicts involving these nations may impact Azerbaijan's foreign policy decisions and alliances. The shared regional and global interests of these three countries are noteworthy. Strengthening Israel-Georgia relations could offer Azerbaijan additional economic prospects. Increased economic collaboration with both nations might expand export markets, fostering economic growth. Azerbaijan's advantageous infrastructure supports the transportation of goods between Israel and Georgia. Moreover, the strategic importance of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, traversing Georgian terrain, is crucial for transporting Azerbaijan's hydrocarbon reserves to Israel.

Azerbaijan actively collaborates with both countries in defence and security. Israel's significant contributions to Azerbaijan's defence industry are undeniable. Furthermore, joint military training experiences with Georgia and Turkey contribute to Azerbaijan's military capabilities. Enhanced relations between Israel and Georgia may lead to expanded trilateral security partnerships, facilitating increased information exchange in areas like counterterrorism and cybersecurity.

In navigating the complex geopolitics of the South Caucasus and the Middle East, the evolving relationship between Israel and Georgia carries nuanced implications for Armenia. The deepening ties between Israel and Georgia may impact Armenia's security dynamics, especially given Israel's well-established connections with Azerbaijan. Armenia could interpret this collaboration as reinforcing Azerbaijan's regional influence. However, it's crucial to acknowledge that Israel plays a significant role as an arms supplier and security partner in the region, including with Azerbaijan. If Israel and Georgia intensify their defence cooperation, it could reshape the regional power dynamics, prompting Armenia to reassess its defence and security strategy. Armenia's simultaneous efforts to strengthen ties with Iran, alongside seeking closer relations with the U.S. and NATO, reflect a delicate balancing act influenced by evolving circumstances and considerations, including the potential impact on its relationship with Iran.

Conclusion

The study of factors affecting the formation of Georgian-Israeli relations and its development dynamics allows us drawing a number of conclusions. Clearly, even before Georgia declared its independence, it held a significant place in Israel's attention. Post independence, Georgia strategically emphasized relations with Israel in its foreign policy. The relations can be traced through three distinct stages. The initial stage (1991-2003) witnessed the establishment of diplomatic and political relations, including the setting up of mutual diplomatic representations. Although foundational steps were taken, the legal framework for the relationship was still in the early stages of development. The second stage (2003-2013) marked as the maturation of Georgia-Israel state relations, indicating a deeper level of engagement and collaboration. In that era, alongside the heightened U.S. presence in Georgia, there was a concurrent surge in Israel's interest in its Middle Eastern ally. The significance of oil and gas projects initiated by the Republic of Azerbaijan during this period played a pivotal role in shaping Georgia-Israel relations. As the primary consumer of Azerbaijani oil, Israel became invested in ensuring the security of pipelines traversing Georgian territory. Any instability within Georgia directly posed a threat to its energy security. Moreover, during those years, Georgia emerged as a key client for

Israel's defence industry. Yet, amid the overall positive relationship, there were moments of tension between the two nations. Despite Israel's unwavering support for Georgia's territorial integrity, the 2008 conflict with Russia prompted restrictions in military cooperation due to Russian threats. These limitations gradually dissipated in the post-war period. Israeli capital actively contributed to Georgia's economy during this phase, aligning with the Georgian government's welcoming approach. However, the arrest of Israeli businessmen in Georgia in 2011 led to renewed strains in international relations.

During this period, there was an expedited process of formalizing the legal contractual framework for cooperation. Various agreements were signed, encompassing trade and economic, military-security, and humanitarian-cultural domains, fostering the development of relations.

Following political changes in Georgia from 2013 onward, despite the departure of the pro-American politician Mikheil Saakashvili, relations with the State of Israel have consistently strengthened. Every president and prime minister in Georgia has prioritized fostering ties with Israel, making efforts to gain support in various ways. This stage is marked by numerous reciprocal visits, the signing of documents facilitating an elevation in relations, and the recognition of Georgia's Georgian-Jewish relations as intangible cultural heritage.

Israel has strategically strengthened its presence in Georgia, effectively countering the influence of its historical regional adversary, the Islamic Republic of Iran. Israel actively supports the Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey collaboration in the energy sector. While recognizing Georgia's territorial integrity, Israel navigates regional politics without engaging in sharp confrontation with Russia. Meanwhile, Georgia seeks to benefit from both the economic prowess and defence capabilities of the State of Israel. At present, relations between Georgia and Israel are progressing in bilateral as well as multilateral dimensions. The progression of these relations isn't limited to presidential and governmental levels; successful parliamentary interactions further underscore their potential. Analysing the dynamics suggests a substantial opportunity for both states, and they mutually see the benefit of leveraging these ties in the near future. Strengthening relations between Georgia and Israel not only enhances regional security but also fosters collaboration.

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