Georgia - Saudi Relations: Bilateral Motivations and Regional Challenges

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Abstract

As a part of the series of reports on Saudi bilateral relations in the South Caucasus, following the latest two, Azerbaijan and Saudi Arabia (2019) and Armenia and Saudi Arabia (2020), this third and last report in the series focuses on those of Georgia and Saudi Arabia. First, it provides a brief historical account of Georgian politics. Secondly, it examines the geopolitics in the South Caucasus, including territorial conflicts inside Georgia with Russia while considering Caucasus neighbors, Azerbaijan and Armenia, and regional players such as Turkey on one hand and Iran on the other. Thirdly, the report moves to shed light on the Georgia’s international relations, mainly with the United States and the European Union, and its foreign policy strategies. Fourthly, focusing on Georgia–Saudi relations, the report provides a further analysis on the increased bilateral developments between the two countries while considering motivations and challenges. The report concludes that the relationship between Georgia and Saudi Arabia improved noticeably between 2015 and 2018 thanks to increased trade and tourism, as well as finding common ground with regards to the geopolitics of the South Caucasus and international politics. But the prospects for further development between the two countries seems to be limited because of potential and existing exclusive outcomes of current trade and tourism relationships, which are magnified by the impacts of COVID-19.
Introduction

This report focuses on the bilateral development between Georgia and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia while considering regional politics and international relations in the South Caucasus. There were noticeable diplomatic efforts between Georgia and Saudi Arabia, particularly after 2015, and this report provides an overall analysis of the two countries after the opening of embassies in each other’s capitals, increased bilateral invitations, visits, and meetings of both sides’ officials, and increasing bilateral cooperation, especially in the tourism and economic sectors.

While the South Caucasus has been experiencing volatile issues such as the recent crisis of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020, it is still an important region, situated as it is between two seas and bordered on one side by Asia and on the other by Europe (Eurasia), and as an ex-Soviet territory that gave birth to three countries, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia. In addition, the South Caucasus, while both partnering and competing these three small countries, also attracts not only regional rival countries such as the Republic of Turkey on one hand, and the Islamic Republic of Iran in the other, but also international actors, including mainly the United States of America, the European Union, and Russian Republic Federation. Regardless of the complexity of the South Caucasus, the three countries have been making some efforts to increase their diplomacy in far more regions, such as Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, and including, for example, Saudi Arabia.

Thus, in order to examine the bilateral relation between Georgia and Saudi Arabia, it is important to give a brief history of Georgian domestic politics, its regional strategy in the South Caucasus, and foreign policy and diplomatic efforts in the international arena before analyzing the latest developments in Georgia–Saudi relations.

Georgia in the South Caucasus

Located to the south of the Caucasus mountains and Russia, Georgia is next to the Black Sea on the west, and bordering Turkey and Armenia to its south, and Azerbaijan to its east. The

country’s population is over 3.9 million, with the majority residing in Tbilisi, the capital, located on the eastern side.\(^{(2)}\)

![Figure 1: Map of Georgia](image)

The establishment of modern Georgia goes back as far as 1918, following the Russian Revolution. However, shortly after Georgia and the remaining two Southern Caucasian countries, Azerbaijan and Armenia, were annexed by the Soviets.\(^{(3)}\) It was only after the demise of the Soviet Union that Georgia declared its Independence, on April 9, 1991, and Zviad Gamsakhurdia became the first elected Georgian President for a short time, before being exiled in early 1992.\(^{(4)}\) During that time, the country slid into what could be called a civil war because of separatist movements in south Ossetia to its east and Abkhazia to its north, and following a coup d’etat, the country was governed through a military council, which was later joined by Eduard Shevardnadze, the former Soviet foreign minister, who returned in 1992 to be elected as Head of State in 1995.\(^{(5)}\) The bloodless Rose Revolution (November 3–23) in 2003 was brought

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about by Georgians protesting against parliamentary fraud, and Shevardnadze was later ousting and the era of ex-Soviet leadership ended. Among the leaders of the Rose Revolution, Mikheil Saakashvili, founder of the United National Movement Party, became the President of Georgia for the next two terms, during which he introduced pro-Western policies and alignments with the European Union. However, due to his alleged corruption and increased opposition, another party, Georgian Dream, won the parliamentary election in 2012, and nominated Giorgi Margvelashvili to be the president, introducing a new constitution that granted more power to the Prime Minister. Since then, the Georgian Dream Party has been the country’s ruling party, with the appointment of the incumbent, Giorgi Gakharia as Prime Minister, and since 2018, Salome Zourabichvili, the first woman to be elected president in Georgia.

Since its independence, Georgia has experienced tension over two regions, Abkhazia and its capital, Sukhumi, covering 8,500 km², and hosting 250,000 residents, while the south Ossetia covers 3,900 km², with around 50,000 inhabitants living mostly in its capital, Tskhinvali. The two regions have expressed separatist plans and, with the support of Russia, fought the government of Georgia for independence. Ceasefire was only reached in both regions in 1992 and 1994. However, the ceasefire did not last long, but erupted again first in south Ossetia and later in Abkhazia in early August 2008, and escalated on August 7 when Russia, through military and troops on the ground, supported the separatist groups in both regions, resulting in major confrontation on both borders. The ceasefire was reached on August 12, 2008, and signed between Georgia and Russia, which later required both sides to return their military to their bases, while Ossetia and Abkhazia maintained their de facto states.

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(7) Jones.


(11) Souleimanov, Abrahamyan, and Aliyev.

Bilateral relations between Georgia and Russia have been critically tense because of this Russian support for the separatist groups in both Abkhazia and Ossetia since the 1990s, and the Russia–Georgia war in 2008 only made them worse, as did Russia’s recognition of the independence of the two disputed regions.\(^{(13)}\) Both countries even froze their bilateral relations, and both have gone through earlier, controversial, political and security incidents: Georgia’s pro-Western stance after the Rose Revolution in 2003; the Russian ban on imports from Georgia; the discovery of Russian agents; the deportation of Georgian working expatriates from Russia in 2006; and several allegations of air space violations in 2007. A normalization effort has been apparent by the two countries in the years after 2012.\(^{(14)}\) However, although efforts to cooperate, relations between Georgia and Russia did not improve during the subsequent governments in Georgia, and reached their worst when social unrest protested against the ruling party’s attitude toward Russia, which caused the latter to halt direct flights and to impose sanctions on Georgian exports in July 2019.\(^{(15)}\)

Georgia is a close partner to Azerbaijan and Turkey, and to a lesser extent Iran, and Armenia, which are considered close allies with Russia, considered by Tbilisi a source of threat.\(^{(16)}\) Moreover, Azerbaijan is a significant partner to Georgia for various aspects, most importantly the many energy pipelines, including the Baku–Supsa (BS) oil pipeline, which runs for around 800 km in the two countries.\(^{(17)}\) With regard to Georgia’s relation with Armenia, its third neighbor, while both countries may have cultural and geographical similarities they have a divergent political orientation, as the former tends to be pro-Western and is supported by the European Union (EU) in several economic zones and the latter is dependent a variety of economic, logistical, and military support from Russian-led organizations.\(^{(18)}\) Georgian relations with Iran tended to be diplomatic and have


\(^{(17)}\) Kornely Kakachia and Michael Cecire, Georgian Foreign Policy The Quest for Sustainable Security (Tbilisi: Konrad-Adenauer-Stifitung (KAS), 2013).

been improving in areas such as in trade and tourism, the economy, and agriculture: however, the country could not ignore the international sanctions against Iran, which put pressure on the two countries’ potential development.\(^{(19)}\) Georgia maintains the most stable and friendly relations with Turkey, its regional neighbor since the 1990s.\(^{(20)}\) In fact, the triangle alliance, which includes the three counties through which energy pipelines pass – Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey – is one of the main policies of Tbilisi within the region of Caucasus in particular.\(^{(21)}\) Georgia–Turkey relations are cemented by a continuing joint commission for cooperation in economy, energy, trade, and even the military.\(^{(22)}\) Turkey remains the largest trade partner with Georgia, with an amount exceeding $1.8 billion, and is the second highest provider of military assistance to Tbilisi, after the US.\(^{(23)}\)

![Figure 2: Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey Energy Pipelines.\(^{(24)}\)](https://example.com/figure2.png)

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Geopolitically, the Caucasus region, and particularly the southern part, situated as it is between the Black Sea to the west and Caspian Sea to the east, has been the location for regional competition among small states like Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia, and regional ones such as Turkey and Iran in the south and Russia in the north. The southern Caucasus region is significant for the Caucasian states regionally and globally as well, particularly for the EU due to major energy projects that aim to bring prosperity to the Caucasus, connect with the world, and decrease European dependence on Russian energy sources. Among the major energy projects are the 1768 km Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline, the 980 km Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum (BTE) natural gas pipeline, and the 826 km transportation project of Baku–Tbilisi–Kars (BTK) railway. These projects contribute to the regionally political and economic common grounds between the participating countries of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey, which will later deliver it to Europe and the world.

Georgian International Relations

The foreign policy of Georgia since its independence and since becoming a member of the United Nations, then Council of Europe, Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), has been to maintain good diplomatic relations with major and European Western countries like the United States of America, the United Kingdom, France, and other European countries. However, Georgia does not have this warm relationship with Russia and their bilateral relations have gone through stressful times and controversial actions. In addition, Georgia developed bilateral relations with most countries in Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America.

Among its closest allies, Georgia is considered a dependable partner for the US in the South Caucasus, especially since the 2008 Russia–Georgia war and the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its annexation of Crimea in 2014. US support to Georgia, including the incumbent


(26) Kornely Kakachia, “Europeanisation and Georgian Foreign Policy,” in The South Caucasus Between Integration and Fragmentation (Strateji Araştırmalar Merkezi (SAM) and European Policy Center (EPC), 2015), 11–18, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/191505/pub_5598_the_south_caucasus_-_between_integration_and_fragmentation.pdf.

government, included support for Georgian membership of NATO, a bilateral American–
Georgian partnership, official political support for Georgia, and funding medical research
and health institutions. The US. also provided congressional support and several actions to
Georgia. The latter has been among the recipients of American foreign aid since the 1990s, with
a total exceeding $3 billion as well as special grants, and considerable military aid and training
cooperation. Economically, Georgia is seventh in importing merchandise from the US at
$389 million, and is the eighth largest exporter to the US, with $132 million. Thus, Georgia’s
relations with the US are among its most important and longest strategy since its independence.

Besides the US, the European Union considers Georgia its closest partner. European–Georgia
relations began to develop in 2008, with the establishment of the NATO–Georgia Commission,
which helped further increase the bilateral and strategic cooperation. In addition, NATO
established some joint defense and training centers in 2015 in Georgia, which hosted the first
and second NATO–Georgia exercise in 2016, and then in 2019. In terms of foreign aid, the
EU provided around $154 million to Georgia in 2018 and 2019. Yet Georgia is a member of
neither the EU nor NATO, although it planned to submit its request in 2024.

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(28) Many US officials have shown support for Georgia and condemnation for Russia, for example, through the recent visit of the US
Vice President Michael Pence to Tbilisi. Earlier, US President Donald Trump expressed US support for Georgia to join NATO.
More recently, in 2020, the US condemned the cyberattacks on Georgian systems and websites, which were attributed to Russian
sources. This was in addition to several Congressional acts, including the Countering Russian Influence in Europe and Eurasia Act
of 2017, and Georgian Support Act in 2019. For additional details on the US–Georgia relations and cooperation, see Cory Welt,

(29) Georgia has joined military deployment to Iraq and then to Afghanistan. It is at the top of the non-NATO member contribution list.
Thus, the US has provided a variety of military assistance, cooperation programs, and training initiatives with an amount equal to
more than $0.5 billion, of which the last program concluded in 2021.

(30) Cory Welt “Georgia: Background and US Policy.”

partnership-between-georgia-and-the-united-states-vision-wanted/.


(33) Being in the top doners for military participation as non-NATO member, Georgia is one of NATO’s Enhanced Opportunity
Partners in 2014 and joined the NATO Response Force in 2015. NATO, “Relations with Georgia.”

(34) Venezuela, Nicaragua, and the Pacific island of Nauru have also recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

(35) High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy European Commission, “Joint Staff Working
implementation_report_in_georgia.pdf.

files/41_78149_280277_GP.pdf.
In addition, Georgia has developed cooperative relations with many more countries, including China and India, and has good diplomatic relations with Pakistan and many Arab countries in North Africa or in the Middle East through either embassies or consulates, and limited trade or investments. However, Georgia severed relation with one Arab country, Syria, because of its recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2018.\(^\text{(37)}\)

In late December 2020, Georgia announced its adoption of the country’s resolution on foreign policy for the following years, building on earlier documents adopted in 2013 and 2016.\(^\text{(38)}\) The recently adopted resolution included 16 points that guide the strategic goals of Georgian foreign policy and international relations, which mainly considers a few issues such as, first and foremost: de-occupation of and support for integration of the country; joining the EU and NATO; increasing ties with the US, the UK, Germany, France, Azerbaijan and Turkey, Armenia while maintaining diplomatic and balanced relations with Russia, and deepening economic and trade with countries in Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East.

**Georgia–Saudi Relations**

The diplomatic relationship between Georgia and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was established on May 27, 1994 and has been noticeably improving since 2015. Georgia first opened its embassy in Riyadh in 2015. In the following year, the General Agreement was signed between both countries to improve economic, trade and political bilateral cooperation. High-level officials of both countries had already exchanged invitations, visits, and meetings in both Tbilisi and Riyadh since 2012. Parliamentary Friendship Committees in the Saudi Shura Council met with the members of the Georgian Parliament in Tbilisi in 2012 and 2019.\(^\text{(39)}\) Moreover, Georgian officials, including the speaker of the parliament, and ministers of defense, agriculture and finance, visited Riyadh between 2016 and 2018.\(^\text{(40)}\) As a result of this ongoing

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development, both countries signed several agreements on double taxation avoidance, and airways services.\(^{(41)}\)

Because of the development of bilateral relations, especially in trades and tourism, Saudi Arabia opened its embassy in Tbilisi in early 2019 prior to the visit of the Saudi Foreign Minister, Ibrahim Al-Assaf and meeting with the Georgian Prime and Foreign Ministers.\(^{(42)}\) Even before these latest improvements between the two countries, Saudi Arabia supported Georgia with regards to Abkhazia and Ossetia by not recognizing them and considering the two regions as significant parts of Georgian integrity.\(^{(43)}\) Although Georgia and Saudi Arabia have improved bilateral relation in less than five years, the economic output is worth mentioning. According to Georgia’s Foreign Ministry, Saudi direct investment in Georgia exceeded $100 million since 2016 and 2018 respectively, which accounts for a 200% increase in comparison to previous years.\(^{(44)}\) Much of the trade between the two countries has included livestock and water, vehicles, real estates, logistical services, energy, and mining.

One of the significant parts of the recent Georgia–Saudi bilateral relations development is tourism, and particularly the continued increase of Saudi tourists to Georgia. According to the Georgian ambassador to Riyadh, in 2015 the number of Saudi tourists was 10,000, which is double the number of 2014, and another 3,000 non-Saudi residents visited Georgia.\(^{(45)}\) The number of Saudi tourists has increased noticeably over the years, reaching 30,000 in 2016, 116% increased on the previous year, then doubling to 60,000 in 2017, decreasing to 50,000 thousand in 2018.\(^{(46)}\) However, due to the


COVID-19 pandemic, the number of Saudi tourists increased 17% in early 2020 before a 94.5% decrease in international travelers to Georgia in mid-2020.\(^{(47)}\)

There are several reasons for the increased tourism industry in Georgia and the number of Saudi tourists visiting the country. They include geographical proximity, affordable costs, and natural and historical sightseeing in Tbilisi, and Batumi, the coastal city located next to the Black Sea in the western side of the country.\(^{(48)}\) Another reason is Georgia’s announcement of visa-free travel for Saudi tourists in late 2016.\(^{(49)}\) Finally, there is the latest improvements in the air industry, which helped make Georgia closer than ever. For example, a Georgian Airways company began a direct flight from Saudi Arabia to Tbilisi for the first time in mid-2016.\(^{(50)}\) In addition, a Saudi airline company has offered direct summer flights from cities in Saudi Arabia to both Tbilisi and Batumi since 2018.\(^{(51)}\) In fact, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there were 11 direct flights between the two countries, which is a high number considering the early growing bilateral development.\(^{(52)}\)

### Bilateral Motivations and Regional Challenges

For Georgia, the recent improvement in bilateral relations, especially in the economic and tourist sectors, provides additional values, including deepening ties with Saudi Arabia, a large and growing country, and increasing the country’s share of Saudi tourists. In addition, considering the impact of COVID-19 on the country’s economy and tourist industry, expanding the country’s relations, especially in the Middle East and particularly with the members of the Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC), including the Kuwait, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Oman,


\(^{(48)}\) Another, albeit cultural, factor that could be considered here is the broadcasting of an action-comedy Saudi TV show that was set and filmed in Tbilisi in July 2019. See “After Its Successful Debut on Jawwy TV, Intigral Holds Roundtable to Discuss ‘Galabt Jad’ Series,” Intigral, 2019, https://beta.intigral.net/blog-details/39/after-its-successful-debut-on-jawwy-tv-intigral-holds-roundtable-to-discuss-galabt-jad-series.


\(^{(50)}\) “Georgia, Saudi Trade Volume Soars 200 Percent.”


will create additional capital for Georgia.\(^{(53)}\) In 2017 alone, more than 106,000 tourists to Georgia came from the GCC’s residents.\(^{(54)}\) Georgia and GCC member states have been developing bilateral ties, especially in the economic and tourist sectors, as noted by the visit of the GCC’s secretary general to Tbilisi in 2017 and later the visit of the Georgian finance minister in 2018.\(^{(55)}\) Politically, by improving ties with the GCC, Georgia seeks to secure further support and allies for its integral territories of Abkhazia and Ossetia, and expand its diplomatic efforts in the Middle East, in particular, with the members of the GCC, which creates valuable sources for economic and tourist investment.

The Saudi approach toward improving relations with Georgia is supported by several factors. One is the increased and diversifying foreign policy in the Caucasus and beyond, which includes particularly the Southern Caucasus countries, mainly Azerbaijan and Georgia. Second, to accommodate the recent increase of tourist and business developments as described in this report. Third, as a regional power, Saudi Arabia seeks to be present in and following Caucasus developments closely, especially regional competition from Turkey and Iran.

Regardless of the both countries’ motivations for improving ties, some challenges are still present, hindering potential bilateral development in Georgia–Saudi relations especially and the three small states of South Caucasus with foreign countries, particularly in the Middle East and beyond. Challenges could be seen from two perspectives, one from the region of South Caucasus and the other from that of Georgian foreign policy.

For the first, it is necessary to take into account the security environment of the South Caucasus, which has been experiencing some ongoing and unresolved territorial conflicts and claims such as the Azerbaijani–Armenia conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, Georgian–Russian tension over Abkhazia and Ossetia under different regional influences, mainly Russia, then Turkey and


Iran since the demise of the Soviet Union and the independence of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia. For example, Russia has been active in the South Caucasus, and sometimes intervened or pressured Georgia since 2008, or has been dominating Armenia’s economy and security through bilateral trade and military agreements. Moreover, another active player in the South Caucasus is Turkey, which is considered a close supporter of Azerbaijan, especially concerning Nagorno-Karabakh’s recent conflicts, and partner to Georgia in economic and military sectors. Iran, another regional player, has been active in regional conflicts, mainly Nagorno-Karabakh, and has opposed any international peace makers, and it has been developing very good trade investment with Georgia and Armenia to avoid international sanctions.

For the second perspective, Georgia as a country has been facing some domestic political changes and crises since its independence, as noted in earlier sections. Moreover, Tbilisi has not yet joined either the West with the EU or NATO nor has it looked to the east and settled its tension with Russia. However, it maintained relations with Middle Eastern players, more so with Turkey, and then Iran, both of which have been engaging separately in regional and international politics and arenas, especially with Arab countries. For instance, Georgia’s changeable relations with Russia, an important partner for many countries, especially those interested in improving ties in the South Caucasus, may not help the development of Georgia–Saudi relations. Moreover, Georgia’s continued warm ties with Iran on one hand and Turkey on the other, could be unhelpful for improving its relationship with Saudi Arabia, which has some competition and rivalry with both. This creates uncertainty about which way Georgia will go and/or how other countries, including Saudi Arabia, establish strategic relation within regional and international politics.

**Concluding Remarks**

The development of Georgia–Saudi relations is another example of bilateral development between two countries, one in the South Caucasus and the other in the Middle East, that are neither geographically far from nor close to each other. While the relationship of the two

countries was established as early as 1994, it improved noticeably between 2015 and 2018 subsequently establishing embassies, making official visits, and holding high-ranking meetings in each other’s capital cities. For Georgia, this development complements its partnership in the Middle East with the largest member of the GCC organization, enhances its international relations, and potentially increases economic, trade and tourism sectors. For Saudi Arabia, the relationship continues and improves what has been the Saudi foreign policy toward the independence of several countries in the South Caucasus and Central Asia after the demise of the Soviet Union.

In conclusion, while this report provided some analysis that shows increasing development in relations between Georgia and Saudi Arabia, it highlights some potential challenges. The first involves the volatile area of the South Caucasus’ territorial conflicts as well as regional competition between the three small countries—Azerbaijan, Armenian and Georgia—and the three regional countries—Russia, Turkey, and Iran—which may undermine regional security, economic prosperity, regional collaboration, and international investment. Second, even though the South Caucasus countries, mainly Azerbaijan and Georgia, and Armenia to a lesser extent, have made efforts to improve economic and political ties with Saudi Arabia, which is noticeably alleviating the bilateral relations, the prospects for further development are limited because of exclusive outcomes and collaborations, which are mainly based on trade and tourism, among others. Nevertheless, the future of either Georgia–Saudi relations and all the South Caucasus countries with Saudi Arabia depend on the security and stability of the South Caucasus region, potential regional and bilateral economic or political outcomes, post-COVID-19 trade and tourism development, and/or any special bilaterally planned cooperation.
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King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies (KFCRIS)

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