

# Iran's Foreign Policy Discourse and the Russia-Georgia-Iran Triangle (2013-2017)

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## **Abstract**

By the advent of various political currents on the realm of power, Iran has witnessed the emergence of sub-discourses that preserve the principles and propositions of the Islamic Revolution's discourse but differ in the subordinate propositions and inter-discourse developments. The latest is a "Moderationist sub-discourse" that has overcome other sub-discourses as the eleventh state started working in Iran. An important aspect of these sub-discourses is the impacts on foreign policy, especially toward the neighboring countries. In this way, Georgia gets significant importance due to its geopolitical features and the great deal of historical, cultural, and civilizational commonalities to Iran.

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However, due to regional and international changing conditions along with coming up various foreign policy sub-discourses, the relations between the two countries have had lots of ups and downs. On the other hand, after the Russo-Georgian 2008 war, the Russian Federation has exerted great influence on the Georgian foreign policy; including the relations with Iran. Therefore, this paper seeks to answer the question, regarding Russo-Georgian 2008 war, how the Moderationist foreign policy discourse has affected the Iranian-Georgian relations? Findings of the study show that the presence of Moderationist sub discourse of Hassan Rouhani affected Iranian foreign policy and the pessimistic subjective impressions of the Georgian leaders towards the previous Iranian government regarding Russia`s 2008 invasion of Georgia. As a result, we have witnessed relative improvement in the relations between two countries in 2013-2017 compared to the relationships of the 2008-2013 period. This research uses the descriptive-analytical method.

**Keywords:** Foreign policy discourse, Moderation, Georgia, Iran, Russia.

**Received:** 2021-08-26

**Review:** 2021-12-30

**Accepted:** 2022-01-17

**Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs, Vol. 12, No. 1, Winter- Spring 2021, pp. 175-192**

## **Introduction**

The study of foreign policy has always been one of the most important and sensitive areas of international relations, which has attracted researchers' attentions due to its dynamic nature. In this regard, in the foreign policy of the Iran after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, despite the relatively tangible presence of a unique order and structure arising from the institutionalized norms of Iran and Islam, as well as the structural determinants of the international system in the history of its foreign policy, Iran has been witnessing developments that could not be ignored. The origins of these developments should be sought in the emergence and development of various political discourses with different approaches, methods and structures that are considered in the international relations literature under the concept of "discourse".

In this regard, developments in the political sphere of countries in general, and in the foreign policy of the countries in particular, are considered as discursive developments, namely, the transformation of the dominant discourse on the political climate of these countries. From this point of view, as new government came to power, there is actually a new discourse which overcomes the others and employs its ideas and doctrines in all areas of economic, cultural, social and political affairs. Also, these discursive developments have taken place at macro and micro levels, which at each level of the transformation affect political systems and structures of the countries on various scales. Perhaps these developments take place at the micro level by considering sub-discourses. Hence the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979 was a discourse transformation at macro level that influenced all the structures of the country and led to the formation of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Subsequently, with the advent of different governments with various mottos and distinct political literature, discursive changes occurred, but not at a large scale similar to the 1979 Islamic revolution (a new sub-discourse gained power) (Jafari & Janbaz, 2016: 94), which is the subject of the present paper.

The moderation discourse of the eleventh government is the latest of these sub-discourses, which dominated other sub-discourses present in the Iran with the presidency of Hassan Rouhani in August 2013. This sub-discourse began with slogans such as avoiding extremism, the balance between idealism and realism, constructive interaction with the world through dialogue, balance developmentalism and similar concepts. On the other hand, due to the regional and global position of the Iran and the issues involved, the main focus was on foreign policy, with the most immediate aspect of it being the nuclear agreement with the P5+1. This agreement and other outcomes of the Moderation discourse in foreign policy have also had an impact on Iran's foreign policy behavior towards other countries.

One of these countries is the Republic of Georgia, due to its unique cultural and geopolitical features, including the religion of Christianity, cultural commonality with Iran, access to free waters and ... has double importance. Hence, the Iran was among the first countries to recognize the independence of this republic, like the other newly independent republics, and began its diplomatic relations with the country. But these relationships have never been stable and could not be considered a regular process. The main reason for this was the changes in the Georgian republic, including the Velvet revolution and the 2008 war with Russia and the recent internal changes in the Islamic Republic of Iran, including the emergence of new sub-discourses.

In this paper, we try to analyze the foreign policy discourse of Moderation for Georgia, given Russia's 2008 war against this country. Therefore, this paper seeks to answer the question that, regarding Russo-Georgian 2008 war, how the Moderationist foreign policy discourse has affected the Iranian-Georgian relations?

This research, based on the nature and type of the subject, uses a descriptive-analytical method and the library method to collect data and information.

## **I- Iranian-Georgian Relations**

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the vacuum of power created in the newly independent republics provided the ground for the presence of regional and transnational powers in these countries. In this regard, the Iran was one of the first countries to recognize the independence of these republics, due to their geographical attachment and the existence of cultural and identity commonality. In the early years of independence, Georgia sought to balance its relations with its southern neighbors in order to contain pressure from the north (post Soviet Union Russia) and to achieve better relations with its historic neighbors. In the same vein, Georgia was seriously seeking to identify its sovereignty and independence by Tehran and Ankara (Najafov, 2008: 39). As a result, diplomatic relations between the Iran and the Republic of Georgia started on May 15, 1992 (Agadjanian, Jödicke & Van der Zweerde, 2015: 233). These relationships have seen many ups and downs during different periods which are partly due to the internal conditions of countries and mainly due to the role of the structure of the international system and interventionist powers.

In the first period of relations between the Iran and the Georgian Republic, we have witnessed the establishment, consolidation and deepening of relations between the countries. The actions taken during this period date back to the presidency of Hashemi Rafsanjani in Iran and also first period of Eduard Shevardnadze in Georgia. As the first years of relations, the first years after the independence of Georgia were accompanied by actions taken at both sides, and the agreements signed between the two countries can be considered as initial and effective steps in this regard. During the presidency of Hashemi Rafsanjani, it was believed that if Iran strengthened its economic relations with the countries of the Caucasus (including Georgia), it could gradually create suitable environment for future political and cultural actions (Vaezi, 2009: 62). Shevardnadze`s trip to Iran in 1994, and in return Hashemi Rafsanjani`s to Georgia in 1995, and the holding of joint economic commissions between the two countries was in the context of this development of relations in the first period of

bilateral relations.

In the later period of relations between the two countries, which lasted from 1996 to 2002 and coincided with the beginning of the second term of office of Eduard Shevardnadze as president until his removal. This period can be divided into two almost opposite halves during which, unlike the declining trend of relations in the first half, a relative development of relations was seen in the second half as well as visits by high-ranking officials of the two countries. But there were still some internal and external obstacles, such as the lack of serious determination by Iran and the obstructionism of the United States that hindered the serious development of relations. The American pressure on Shevardnadze and his country's authorities due to need for the political and economic support of the West, had led to the cancellation of Shevardnadze's trip to Tehran on several occasions despite the necessary concordance and during his first trip to Iran in 1993, never managed to visit Tehran (Amirahmadian & Asgari 2013: 4-5). During his 1993 visit to Tehran, documents were signed between the two countries that established the legal basis for the development of Iran-Georgia cooperation. Of Course, the main role in this meeting should be in the meeting of Shevardnadze when he was the foreign minister of the Soviet Union, and Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic Revolution (Ter-oganov, 2004: 95). Although this relationship has not been sustained due to Georgia's West orientation arising from its geopolitical features (Christian population and culture, geopolitical ties with Europe, etc.) and under the pressure from the United States, the relations between Iran and Georgia went cold.

The events of November 2003, which took place after the massive fraud in the presidential elections in Georgia and subsequent mass demonstrations in this country, led to a peaceful change of government (the victory of the opposition led by Saakashvili and the overthrow of Shevardnadze), which was named the Rose revolution (Jawad, 2005:1). Even though this revolution caused a more pro-Western government to come to power, after this new government came to

power in Georgia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, which had an appropriate understanding of the situation, emphasized on independence and territorial integrity of Georgia and recognized the new Georgian government, and sent a high-level group to participate in the 2004 presidential inauguration of Georgia. On the other hand, such an understanding by the Georgian government and their tendency towards the development of relations led to Saakashvili's visit to Tehran in 2004 and the signing of new agreements between the two countries. (Amirahmadian & Asgari, 2013: 5). Of course, the role of the Reformist Government's discourse cannot be ignored with strong tendencies toward the West and support for color revolutions in this consolidation of relations derived from West-led, US-led revolution.

With the change of government and the coming of Mahmud Ahmadinejad to power in Iran, the relationship continued to grow (albeit at a lesser pace and less than the first years of independence). Even in 2010, a Memorandum of Understanding on visa waiver between the two countries was signed. According to the memorandum, more than 60,000 Iranian citizens visited Georgia in the following year (Milani, 2016: 15). Meetings of the two countries' officials also took place at higher levels. Although at the same time there was a rumor about the use of Tbilisi airport by the US and Israel, due to the growing gaps and disputes between the Iran and the United States on Iran's nuclear program, while fragile, relations were still at a rather favorable level. Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili invitation of Mahmud Ahmadinejad to visit Georgia is a proof to this claim. But the fragility of these relations was due to the strong opposition of the Islamic Republic to the West regarding the sanctions imposed on the Iran's nuclear activities, the more West oriented Georgia after the Red Rose Revolution, the expansion of Tbilisi-Tel Aviv relations and US pressure on the country to such an extent that economic relations in the Energy field and the Visa waiver agreement and other cooperative measures failed to resist it. The 2008 war of Russia and Georgia and the stance of the Islamic Republic in this regard were a killing blow to these fragile relations. The war, which, through direct military intervention, led to the

separation of the South Ossetia and Abkhazia regions of Georgia, had an influence range more than other developments affecting the relations between the two countries.

## **II- The Factor of Russo-Georgian war of 2008**

With the coming of Mikhail Saakashvili as the result of the Rose Revolution in Georgia and his intense West tendencies, he came to restore the central government's authority to the separatist regions. In 2004, he tightened controls on the South, increasing pressure on South Ossetia. He also sent several hundred military personnel, police and intelligence personnel to the area with the aim of combating organized crime and smuggling, which according to rumors was organized by the Georgian authorities and some Russian citizens (Nichol, 2009:3). Similar actions were also taken in the Abkhazia area, which led to the clashes between the Georgian forces and the forces of Ossetia and Abkhazia. With the arrival of Russia and other actors, the crisis became more complex over the years of 2006-2008. For example, on April 24, 2008, at the United Nations, the United States, Germany, France, and all the Friends of the Secretary-General for Georgia, expressed their concerns about Russia's policies towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and in this regard Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili called for negotiations on the Internationalization of peace-keeping operations in these two regions (Cornell, et al., 2008: 9). The Georgian government thus tried to strike a balance against Russia. Eventually, in August 2008, Russia's rapid response to a counter-attack on Georgian military operations in South Ossetia was followed by successive attacks on Georgian troops in both Abkhazia and Ossetia, estimated to be between 35,000 and 40,000 Russian troops and Russian allies against 12 to 15 thousand Georgian troops (Bryce-Rogers, 2013: 349). Eventually, the war ended with the separation of the two regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and the granting of autonomy under the Russian banner. The end has never been pleasing to the Georgian government and has always been considered an invasion by the Russians to their

sovereignty and integrity.

But with the onset of this war, Tehran remained silent for a while and did not make any special statements. The same delay in announcing the stances made the Georgian authorities upset. In its position, Iran expressed its concern about the military clashes in the South Ossetian region, which resulted in human losses and the killing of defenseless people, and called for the immediate cessation of hostilities and relief to the affected people (Birca, 2008). Subsequently, with a slight delay on August 16, 2008, Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki, in a telephone conversation with his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov called for a halt to the war and the restoration of peace and stability to the region (Afrasiabi, 2008). Meanwhile, rumors have been made that Iran has been advocating Moscow's action in international media and political space. With the onset and intensification of the clashes, Tehran's newspapers were silent, refraining from deep-seated analysis of the crisis and commenting on the issue. The state media also covered the news in a way to prevent Moscow's protest. It said that there has been a various factor hidden behind the official silence of Iran in this matter. These include Iran's participation with Moscow in opposition to the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Iran's susceptibility to Russia's concerns about its internal security. In the context of the first factor, Tehran and Moscow regard this crisis as a major defeat for the "expansion of NATO to the east" in the shadow of the shameless siding of the Tbilisi government with the West. The second factor becomes more prominent with US plans to deploy a missile shield in Eastern Europe.

Although Georgia's new ambassador, Georgy Janzhaghaev, stated in an interview with the Iranian media in 2009, that after the war, Mr. Mottaki traveled to Georgia and offered good suggestions from the Islamic Republic of Iran. In response to a frank question about whether it is true that in the opinion of the Georgians, Iran has been in favor of Russia in this dispute, Janzhaghaev replied without denying it: We cannot say that! We were pleased with the visit of Mr. Mottaki to Tbilisi, and Iran had adopted a very balanced

stance during the crisis. Iran tried to understand the roots of the crisis. The reality is that Iran has not recognized the separatist republics, and this is the most significant component of Iran's stance in the recent crisis (Mehr News Agency, 2013). From this standpoint and other stances of the Georgians it can be seen that the Georgians have never been satisfied with the stance of the Iran towards this war, and only express their satisfaction with Iran's non-recognition of the isolated areas of the country-which only four member states of United Nations including Russia, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Nauru have recognized their independence (Tekushev, Markedonov & Shevchenko, 2013: 19).

However, lack of support from the West for Georgia against Russia in this war was also a factor in maintaining the narrow link between the Iran and Georgia. After the conflict, the disagreements between the Iran and Russia in areas such as Iran's nuclear case and Russia's support for Western anti-Iranian measures, the failure to deliver the strategic system of anti-aircraft and ballistic S 300 missiles, and other measures taken by the Russians, caused improvement in the relations between Iran and Georgia to some extent and it recovered from the cold state of the early post-war years of 2008 and the recovery was accelerated with the arrival of a new government in Iran in August of 2017. But re-emergence of Iran-Russia relations after the rise of conflicts in the Syrian crisis has further added to the complexities of Iran's and Georgia's steady relations. But the passage of time reflects the relative stability in foreign policy of Moderation discourse towards Georgia.

### **III- The Factor of JCPOA and Iran-Georgia Relations (2013-2021)**

The most Important outcome of the discourse of Moderation and the government of Hassan Rouhani, can be seen as an agreement on the Islamic Republic's nuclear case and the P5+1. An agreement that led to the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding which was called Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. But this agreement has never been left to the Islamic Republic and the six countries of the opposite side, and the extent of its impact on the allies and

opponents of the seven countries was significant. The Republic of Georgia also has not been outside the framework and has been taken effect by his share. A much more important issue is the interaction and neighborhood between Georgia and the East and West (Russia, Europe, and the United States), which has doubled the impact taken from this agreement. In this regard, due to the improvement of relations between the Iran and the West in particular, as the result of JCPOA and with the agreement on lifting the sanctions, many barriers to economic relations with Georgia were virtually eliminated. Though some experts have said that US sabotages in case of lifting the sanctions has led to problems in the economic relations between the Iran and the world, but the mental and psychological effects of JCPOA cannot be ignored.

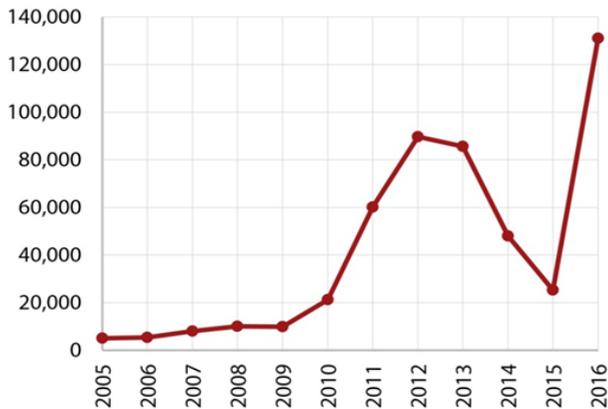
In this regard, several meetings between the two authorities and the agreements made, especially in the field of economics, can be noted. Congratulation message of Hojat el-Islam Hassan Rouhani to his counterpart Giorgi Margvelashvili on his election as the president of the Georgia Republic (Rouhani, 2013a) and on the occasion of the National Day of Georgia (Rouhani, 2015) was the first step in the reconstruction, consolidation and the development of bilateral relations in 2014. While in 2013, we witnessed this done by Es'hagh Jahangiri, the first deputy of the eleventh government. In February 2015, following an agreement between Iran and the P5+1 states, a telephone conversation between the Georgian prime minister and the President of Iran took place, in order to congratulate the success on the nuclear deal and to emphasize on Georgia's readiness for a new chapter in relations with the Iran (Agenda News Agency, 2016). Perhaps this could be one of the main effects of the moderation discourse on the relations of the Iran and the Republic of Georgia.

Earlier, President Rouhani's emphasis was placed on developing relations between the two countries in various fields in response to the congratulations from the Prime minister of Georgia on the occasion of his victory in the eleventh presidential election (Rouhani, 2013b). On the sidelines of the UN General Assembly,

during the meeting of Rouhani and Irakli Gharybashvili, they emphasized on the development of cooperation on water, energy and transit (Official website of the President of Islamic Republic of Iran, 2014a). This was heightened by a meeting with the ambassador of Georgia with Hojat el-Islam Rouhani, with the emphasis and negotiation, in order to create the necessary infrastructure for the development of economic relations (Official website of the President of Islamic Republic of Iran, 2014b). The emphasis on higher levels of cooperation between the two countries also took place on the sidelines of the visit of the Prime minister of Georgia and the delegation to Iran and during the meeting with President Rouhani in fields of gas exports, cooperation for stability and security, and the détente of relations (Official website of the President of Islamic Republic of Iran, 2015). With the expansion of political relations between the two countries, the visit of Mohammad Javad Zarif to Tbilisi was also held in April 2017.

This was the first visit of the Iranian high representative to Georgia in the government of Hassan Rouhani. Meanwhile, the energy sector is perhaps the most important and attractive area for cooperation between Iran and Georgia. With the experience of the Gas crisis in August 2008, and Iran which was exporting gas to Georgia after the crisis (Koozehgar Kaleji, 2017), in the government of Hassan Rouhani, the two countries were considering constructing a natural gas transit pipeline from Iran to Europe from the route of Armenia and Georgia, beyond these exports. In this regard, in July 2016, an agreement was signed between the two countries on this issue (Mehr News Agency, 2016). Another area that was important in this period is tourism, which has a significant portion of Georgia's gross domestic product. After the visa waiver for trip from Iran to Georgia in November 2010, the number of Iranian tourists in Georgia increased significantly. But again, under the pressure from the United States, after the Georgian government's move to the urgent need to issue visas to Iranians in 2013, the number of Iranian tourists in Georgia declined greatly. Under mounting US pressure, in July 2013 Georgia froze Iranian

citizens' and businesses' bank accounts with no prior notice, suspended the visa-free regime, and unilaterally cancelled some earlier agreements and contracts. The restrictions were applied rather indiscriminately and affected many legitimate businesses, dealing a serious blow to Iranian investors' confidence in Georgia. But with the signing the deal between Iran and the P5+1 and the relative improvement of the relations between Iran and Georgia, in 2016, Iran's visa waiver system was reinstated and we witnessed an increase in Iranian tourists to Georgia. About 140,000 Iranian tourists traveled to Georgia this year (Jijelava, 2017: 15).



**Figure 1. Number of Iranian tourists in Georgia (2005-2016)**

Source: (Jijelava, 2017:15)

In addition, Georgia attracted many Iranian companies during the sanctions period, especially in the agriculture, food, and construction industries. Statistics show that trade turnover between Georgia and Iran rose from \$51.4 million in 2009 to \$176.8 million in 2013; in 2016, it stood at \$131 million (Weiss & Zabanova, 2017: 6). In total, according to Iran's and Georgia's joint economic commission, since 2014, the volume of trade between the two countries has increased by more than 50% (Tamin24, 2017). In addition to these collaborations, the two countries have expressed a tendency to actualize the cultural-civilizational potentials in the

scientific and cultural spheres. Signing of contracts between Iranian and Georgian universities, as well as the intensification of Iran's cultural consultations in Georgia through the unveiling of scientific, cultural and artistic works, including the Persian-Georgian dictionary, and the holding of numerous conferences and seminars, verify this claim.

Indeed, the presence of Moderationist sub discourse of Hassan Rouhani affected Iranian foreign policy and the pessimistic subjective impressions of the Georgian leaders towards the previous Iranian government regarding Russia's 2008 invasion on Georgia and we have witnessed relative improvement in the relations between two countries in 2013-2017 comparing to the relationships of 2008-2013 period.

Continuing such a trend could, in addition to improve Iran-Georgia relations to a sustainable level, increase Iran's role in the South Caucasus. Particularly given Iran's and Russia's intercontinental cooperation on regional issues in the Middle East, which has led to a remarkable enhancement of relations between the two countries over the past three decades, there are grounds for further cooperation between them and the neglect of the disputes in the South Caucasus. Previously also, Iran and Russia have experienced constructive cooperation in the Tajik civil war. Although Russia and the West tried to ignore Iran's role in the Karabakh conflict in the Minsk Group, Iran, however, has shown stability in its foreign policy towards Armenia and Azerbaijan, and can play a significant role in regional stability. Hence, it would be possible to even witness an increase in the mediation role of Iran in the Russo-Georgian crisis in the event of faster pacification of the Tehran-Tbilisi relations.

## **Conclusion**

The development of Iran and Georgia relations and the upward trend should be sought in two ways. First, the emphasis of Moderation discourse on relations with the West, and in particular the conclusion of a nuclear agreement with the P5+1, led to the

removal of many barriers to the development of economic and political relations between the countries. Second, the mental and emotional burden of Georgia's statesmen fading out on the stances of the Iran towards the August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia, which led to the separation of parts of Georgia. This mental momentum was due to the change of government in Iran and the hope of changing the new government's perspective on the conflict, and then the reestablishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran's relations with the West; because according to some analyzes, the main reason for the Islamic Republic of Iran's stance regarding the 2008 war was Georgia's relations with the West.

Consequently, it has become an excellent opportunity for the development of relations between the two countries in recent years, when the Iran is investing infrastructure affairs for the development of relations such as the establishment of transit routes (roads and railways), energy pipelines, interim and long-term economic programs, and in particular, the use of cultural and civilian capacities, by establishing the relatively stable relations between the two countries, to witness the exploitation of these conditions in the future. But balancing and equilibrium in relations with the Russian Federation, especially after Russia's attempts to normalize relations with Georgia without solving the problems of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, could create sensitivities for relations between the two countries. Iran's resistance to Moscow's opposition to the construction of a gas pipeline from Iran-Armenia-Georgia route and, on the other hand the adoption of more conservative approaches by the Georgian government towards its relations with the West, and in particular Israel, could guarantee a continued upward trend in Iran-Georgia current relations. To such an extent that even a mediating role for Iran could be considered Georgian-Russo crisis.

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