

# Georgia's Iranian Turn: Tehran's Rapid Expansion of Influence in a Once-Committed US Ally

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Cover: New Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian sits beside Iranian officials and other leaders during his swearing-in ceremony in Tehran on July 30, 2024. On the first row on the far left is Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze. (Getty Images)

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Decline in US-Georgia Relations

After the 2003 Rose Revolution, Georgia was one of the United States' most dependable strategic partners in the Black Sea region. Its commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration, substantial contributions to US-led missions in Iraq and Afghanistan, cooperation on counterterrorism and energy transit made Georgia central to Washington's regional strategy. That alignment extended to working together on sensitive Iran-related security matters, including through intelligence sharing and law-enforcement support.

Today, however, Georgia is moving in a different direction. Led by the party Georgian Dream, the government has become more authoritarian while aligning closer with US adversaries—in particular, Russia and the Islamic Republic of Iran. This shift culminated in December 2024 when the US suspended the US-Georgia Strategic Partnership Charter and sanctioned Georgian Dream founder Bidzina Ivanishvili. At the same time, Iranian political, religious, economic, and cultural influence in Georgia has risen sharply and is now systematic and deeply embedded in segments of Georgian society.

This report documents Iran's expanding influence in Georgia and demonstrates that Tbilisi is facilitating Iranian penetration while allowing Tehran to build an extensive network of influence infrastructure. This activity directly threatens US national security interests in the South Caucasus, undermines Western influence, and strengthens a regime that is committed to exporting the ideology of the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

## A Strategic Realignment Toward Tehran

Georgia's pivot toward Iran has been visible at the highest levels of government. Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze traveled twice to Iran in 2024—once for the funeral of former President Ebrahim Raisi, alongside leaders of Hamas and Hezbollah, and later for the inauguration of President Masoud Pezeshkian. In 2025, Georgia's deputy foreign minister signaled solidarity with Tehran by visiting the Iranian embassy and signing a condolence book that honored those killed in US-Israel strikes.

These decisions reflect a broader pattern. Georgia permits Russian strategic airlifters to transit its airspace en route to Iran, even though Russia occupies 20 percent of Georgia's territory. Analysts believe these flights have carried supplies that bolstered the Iranian regime during periods of internal unrest. Meanwhile, Tbilisi has allowed Tehran to expand its presence in Georgia's religious, educational, cultural, economic, and media sectors.

Georgia and Iran's growing alignment directly undermines US policy in the region. By breaking with its Western orientation, Tbilisi weakens the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's position in the Black Sea region, provides Iran a new strategic platform in Eurasia, and complicates US efforts to establish peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

## Iran's Influence Infrastructure in Georgia

The Islamic Republic's penetration of Georgia is deliberate, organized, and comprehensive. It focuses particularly on the country's ethnic Azerbaijani Shia minority, who mostly live in the region Kvemo Kartli. Iran has long seen this community as a strategic target and uses the following mechanisms to influence them:

- Religious and educational institutions, such as branches of the Ahl al-Bayt World Assembly and the US-sanctioned Al-Mustafa International University, operate openly in Georgia and promote Tehran-aligned religious doctrine. They also cultivate loyal clerical networks and provide ideological training framed as religious education.
- Madrasas and youth-mobilization networks groom the next generation of Georgian Shia leaders, foster loyalty to Iran's political theology, and normalize anti-American narratives.
- During pilgrimages, Georgian Shia believers move through Iran and Iraq for the Arbæen commemorations. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) uses these trips for recruitment, indoctrination, and intelligence spotting.
- Iran-linked charitable foundations not only provide social

welfare but also help Iran enhance its influence, transfer resources, and expand its soft power.

- Pro-Iranian media platforms amplify Tehran's narratives, lionize its leaders, and systematically promote anti-Western messaging to the Azerbaijani-speaking population of Georgia.
- Through economic penetration and sanctions-evasion networks, Iran is working to turn Georgia into a sanctions-evasion hub. These efforts include a surge in Iranian-affiliated company registrations in Georgia and a sharp increase in Iranian imports after 2022.

Georgian state institutions—such as the State Agency for Religious Issues—quietly accept this infrastructure's expansion, and in many cases cooperate with Iran. For example, Georgia has received senior Iranian regime figures on an official level, including Ayatollah Reza Ramezani of the Ahl al-Bayt World Assembly, while they were directly engaging with pro-Iran networks in the country.

## The Ideological Dimension: Exporting the Revolution

Iran's activities in Georgia are part of its efforts to export the 1979 revolution, as mandated by the Islamic Republic's constitution. For decades, Tehran has used clerical networks, educational programs, charities, pilgrimage structures, and aligned media to build ideological ecosystems across the Middle East, Africa, Europe, and Latin America. Tehran is now incorporating Georgia into that system.

Events once unimaginable in Georgia—such as rallies displaying portraits of the late Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah, or public commemorations of the late IRGC commander Qassem Soleimani—now take place openly. Members of youth networks wear T-shirts bearing the image of terrorist leaders. Tasua religious processions in Marneuli have carried explicitly anti-American banners attacking the US president.

This campaign is not simply religious outreach. It is political indoctrination. And because Georgia occupies a strategic transit corridor between Europe, Turkey, Iran, and the Caspian Basin, the stakes extend well beyond its borders.

## A Threat to the US and Its Allies

Iran's growing presence in the country further undermines US interests by:

- Strengthening Tehran's ability to project power into the South Caucasus and Black Sea region
- Undermining US and NATO strategic depth in Eurasia
- Enabling possible Iranian sanctions evasion, financial flows, and covert logistics
- Normalizing anti-US ideology among a key regional population
- Creating fertile ground for intelligence recruitment and paramilitary mobilization
- Threatening US energy security interests by placing Iranian influence near major pipeline routes

Furthermore, Georgia's drift toward Iran is part of a broader geopolitical realignment that includes closer ties with Moscow. This shift also weakens democratic institutions, places legal pressure on pro-Western nongovernmental organizations and media, and erodes traditional Western partnerships.

Policymakers in the West have not noticed the expansion of Iranian-linked networks in Georgia, once a staunch US ally. Tehran can therefore entrench its influence with limited scrutiny or resistance, and the West will have great difficulty reversing this trend.

## Conclusion

Georgia was once a model partner of the United States in the Black Sea region: Tbilisi was democratic, pro-Western, and cooperative on security matters, especially in regard to Iran. But now US-Georgia relations are at their lowest point in decades.

Iran's growing influence in Georgia has driven this shift. Tehran has constructed sophisticated influence infrastructure that merges religious indoctrination, political alignment, cultural outreach, economic penetration, and media propaganda. This campaign helps the Iranian regime export the Islamic Revolution and weakens US influence across Eurasia.

Left unaddressed, Iranian penetration of Georgia will deepen and further erode Western leverage, empower US adversaries, and increase the risk that Iranian-driven instability will spread across the South Caucasus. Therefore, US policymakers should treat Georgia's Iranian turn as a pressing strategic challenge rather than as a peripheral concern.



# GEORGIA'S IRANIAN TURN

**“America is the biggest terrorist.”**

— A call to support Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in a Georgian mosque

## A Wake-up Call

During a sermon on February 2 at the Imam Ali Mosque, one of the biggest Shia mosques in Georgia, the key clerical leader Haji Hajiyev described the United States as “the biggest terrorist in the region.” He expressed solidarity with Iran’s late Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and referred to leaders of the terrorist group Hamas whom Israel had killed as “martyrs.” Posters of the ayatollah were displayed inside the mosque during the sermon, and several people in attendance also held images of him.<sup>1</sup>

A few days later, senior Georgian government officials and other individuals closely linked to the ruling Georgian Dream party participated in a ceremony in Tbilisi marking the Islamic Revolution’s anniversary. Georgia’s deputy foreign minister, Lasha Darsalia, said during an address, “It is a great honor for me, on behalf of the Government of Georgia, to congratulate this country on the National Day of the Islamic Republic of Iran.”<sup>2</sup> The Tbilisi TV Tower marked the anniversary by displaying the red, white and green colors of the Iranian flag. Tbilisi City Hall said that the tower was lit at the request of the Iranian embassy.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast to these ceremonies and commemorations, Georgian officials were notably absent from the July 4 celebration last year held at the US embassy.

Such displays of Georgian Dream’s coziness with the Islamic Republic of Iran should be a wake-up call for US policymakers.

## Background

After the 2003 Rose Revolution, Georgia—perched on the Black Sea’s eastern shore—was one of Washington’s most reliable

allies in the strategically vital Black Sea region. After decades of Soviet domination and the chaos of the 1990s, Tbilisi began to entrench the revolution’s democratic agenda and moved toward the West. Then in August 2008, Vladimir Putin targeted the country in his first campaign to reverse the Cold War outcome. His invasion became the opening salvo in a broader offensive that reached its grim crescendo with the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

In response, and in recognition of Georgia’s strategic importance, Tbilisi and Washington signed the US-Georgia Strategic Partnership Charter in 2009. Although the Obama administration’s so-called reset with Moscow initially slowed the pace of bilateral defense cooperation with Tbilisi, Georgia’s alignment with the United States deepened. In Washington, policymakers viewed Georgia as a loyal ally not only for its unwavering commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration but also for its readiness to assume real risks alongside the United States. As the largest per-capita contributor among all non-NATO nations to both the Iraq and Afghanistan missions, Georgia demonstrated a level of solidarity and sacrifice that few small states of its size and circumstance could match.

This steadfastness—combined with its democratic reforms, strong public support for NATO membership, consistent cooperation on counterterrorism and energy transit—made Georgia a cornerstone of US strategy in the Black Sea and Caspian regions.

The US-Georgia partnership also included close security cooperation and intelligence sharing on Iran. Georgia loyally accommodated US interests on this sensitive issue even though it borders Iran (the distance from Tbilisi to the Iranian border is around 400 miles). For example, Georgia arrested and extradited to the United States a major Iranian arms dealer, Amir Hossein Ardebili, in 2009 after a US sting operation in Tbilisi.<sup>4</sup> An American court later convicted him of attempting to purchase components for fighter jets, missiles, and radar systems on behalf of the Islamic Republic.

Image 1. Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze in Tehran Standing Alongside Hamas Leader Ismail Haniyeh



Source: “Kobakhidze: These Are Disgraceful Speculations, Iran Is a Very Important Country in the Region,” *Georgia News*, July 31, 2024, <https://sakartvelosambebi.ge/en/news/kobakhidze-these-are-disgraceful-speculations-iran-is-a-very-important-country-in-the-region>.

Fast-forward to 2026, and Georgia has reversed its post–Rose Revolution trajectory. Iran’s surging influence tracks in negative correlation with Tbilisi’s progressive estrangement from Washington and the West in general. Bilateral ties have cooled year after year, culminating in the US suspending the Strategic Partnership Charter and sanctioning Georgian Dream’s founder and de facto leader, Bidzina Ivanishvili, alongside some of his lieutenants in December 2024. Once America’s most committed regional ally, Georgia now aligns unmistakably with Tehran, rendering Iran’s penetration undeniable and unprecedented. This shift has largely unfolded under the radar in Washington, but the administration needs to focus on it.

Three events in 2024 and 2025 exemplify Georgia’s shift. First, Deputy Foreign Minister Aleksandre Khvtisiashvili went to the Iranian embassy in Tbilisi and signed a condolence book honoring those killed after American and Israeli airstrikes against the

Islamic Republic. According to the embassy’s press statement, Deputy Minister Khvtisiashvili attended an embassy event that commemorated the “martyrs killed in the Israeli regime’s attack.”<sup>5</sup> This political act clearly carried political importance, and it was preceded by Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze visiting Iran not once but twice. He traveled there in May 2024 to attend the funeral of Iranian President Ibrahim Raisi. Significantly, leaders of Hezbollah and Hamas also attended the ceremony. Later, on July 30, 2024, Kobakhidze traveled to Iran a second time to participate in the inauguration of Iran’s new president, Masoud Pezeshkian. During the inauguration, Kobakhidze appeared in the same photo with former Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh (see photo 1). Kobakhidze also sat in a prominent place in the Iranian Parliament next to leaders of international terrorist organizations. As part of this second visit, he held an official meeting with President Pezeshkian.<sup>6</sup>

Another recent development demonstrates the growing cooperation between Tehran and Tbilisi, and between Tbilisi and Moscow. Multiple Russian strategic airlifters flew from Russia to Iran using both Georgian and Armenian airspace. These aircraft using Armenian airspace is unsurprising, but their use of Georgian airspace in late 2025 and early 2026 is surprising because Russia currently occupies 20 percent of the country’s territory.<sup>7</sup> Presumably, the airlift operation delivered supplies to the Islamic Republic to prop up the regime during nationwide protests there.

These events were part of a consistent trajectory of Georgia embracing the Islamic Republic’s political influence. Critically, over the past decade Georgian authorities have enabled Iranian penetration. Tbilisi has allowed Iran to construct a formidable network of influence infrastructure on an unprecedented scale—cloaked as religious, educational, and cultural institutions that according to other countries serve as Iranian intelligence fronts. The infrastructure includes, but is not limited to, the Ahl al-Bayt World Assembly (ABWA), four Shia madrasas, and a branch of a US-sanctioned Iranian university. Meanwhile, the Islamic Republic has aggressively advanced its political agenda inside Georgia,

particularly among its ethnic Azerbaijani Shia population, with a clear anti-American agenda. It has also recruited Georgian citizens to assassinate its opponents on US soil. Rallies displaying portraits of Ayatollah Khamenei and Hassan Nasrallah while condemning the United States and President Donald Trump—once unimaginable in Georgia—are now a reality. So too are conferences idolizing and commemorating international terrorists such as Qasem Soleimani and Hassan Nasrallah.

This report details how such a dramatic reversal—and blow to US influence—was possible. It describes Iran’s surging influence in a once-stalwart US ally and gauges the erosion of Georgia’s Western alignment. The following sections also address why this development imperils American national security, and what the Trump administration should do to stop and reverse Georgia’s alarming drift.

## Why Georgia Matters

While democratic backsliding in any US partner country is troubling, in Georgia the consequences are especially serious because it undermines US interests across the Black Sea region and Eurasia. The country’s growing coziness with US adversaries has also become alarming. Western policy-makers broadly understand that the Georgian Dream-led government has increasingly embraced the Kremlin’s worldview, but they are generally unaware of the deepening relationship between Georgia and Iran. This relationship should worry Washington.

Georgia’s strategic geography, sitting at a key crossroads in the South Caucasus, has long made it militarily and economically significant. Oil and gas pipelines crossing its territory play a critical role in Europe’s energy security and, by extension, US strategic objectives. If Iran were to gain greater influence in Georgia—whether formally or informally, and especially in regions where it is active or where major energy pipelines operate—the regime would significantly strengthen its geopolitical position while weakening that of the United States.

Moreover, Iran’s increasing influence in the South Caucasus risks undermining President Trump’s peace efforts between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Tehran is already uneasy about the proposed Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity, the centerpiece of the White House’s plan to normalize relations between Yerevan and Baku. A more confident and emboldened Iran operating inside Georgia may feel freer to try to derail this initiative.

Tehran has long sought to undermine US national interests by creating volatility in once-stable countries and fomenting geopolitical crises. The regime can achieve this by exporting the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which the constitution says its leaders must support. Just as Iran has pursued this goal by interfering in the internal affairs of countries with Shia populations, including Iraq, Bahrain, and Lebanon, as well as through its support for proxies in Yemen and Syria. Georgia clearly represents the next step in this broader, ongoing strategy.

Additionally, because Georgians can easily use their passports to travel internationally, Iran can use its influence in the country to carry out international crimes. The Iranian regime has long systematically co-opted transnational organized crime syndicates to conduct extraterritorial operations. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its Quds Force leverage these partnerships to bypass sanctions, generate off-books revenue, carry out assassinations, abduct targets, and conduct sabotage while preserving plausible deniability. For example, a 2025 BBC investigation uncovered an assassination network in Europe contracting the post-Soviet thieves-in-law (i.e., mafia bosses) network for hits on dissidents in Germany.<sup>8</sup> A US federal court in New York convicted a Georgian national, Polad Omarov, for his role in an IRGC assassination plot against Iranian-American journalist Masih Alinejad, who recently spoke at the United Nations Security Council, amid the mass killings of demonstrators in Iran.<sup>9</sup> Notably, Omarov is a nephew of Nadir Saliphov, a Georgian thief-in-law of ethnic Azerbaijani background. In a separate case, another Georgian national linked with organized crime, Agil Aslanov, was arrested

in Azerbaijan after being recruited by the Quds Force to help carry out an attempted assassination of a Jewish leader in Azerbaijan.<sup>10</sup>

## Sources of Iranian Influence

This section explores the growth of Iranian influence in Georgia and identifies the main instruments of Tehran's power projection—including religious, educational, cultural, and informational channels. It traces their evolution from nascent initiatives to entrenched operations. The section encompasses the key educational and cultural organizations that the Islamic Republic has supported over the years, their expansion trajectories, and their multifaceted roles in shaping local perceptions. A subsection details how each entity contributes to Iran's broader campaign of anti-American indoctrination and propaganda.

By dissecting this anatomy of influence, the following analysis illuminates not only how Iran has carried out its quiet conquest but also why the United States needs to counter it. Otherwise, Georgia's drift from the West toward a malign actor may accelerate and become irreversible.

### Georgia's Ethnic Azerbaijani Population

According to Georgia's 2014 census, which is the most recent one with detailed ethnic data, the country is home to 233,024 ethnic Azerbaijanis. Approximately 80 percent of them are Shia Muslims.<sup>11</sup> Seeking leverage in the Caucasus and in Georgia specifically, the Islamic Republic has long viewed this community, which is concentrated primarily in the southern Kvemo Kartli region, as a strategic opportunity.

To build a foothold in Georgia, Tehran began cultivating direct influence over the country's ethnic Azerbaijanis as early as the second half of the 1990s, capitalizing on post-Soviet religious vacuums and ethnic ties. Over the ensuing decades, the regime has achieved considerable success in building a sophisticated network that now permeates religious, educational, cultural, and informational spheres. This influence has eroded Georgia's

pro-Western orientation, amplified anti-American narratives among the Azerbaijani Shia population, and indoctrinated these people with Iran's ideology.

Iranian influence among ethnic Azerbaijanis began its steady ascent in 2013. That year the Georgian Dream government's State Security Service allegedly pressured and blackmailed Sheikh Vagif Akperov, Georgia's Shia sheikh since 2011, into resigning.<sup>12</sup> He stepped down in 2014, effectively clearing the path for Tehran-aligned figures to consolidate power. This ouster undermined the autonomy of the Muslim Administration of Georgia, which was established in 2011 to foster self-governance, align the community with the country's Euro-Atlantic foreign policy goals, and minimize external influences from places like Iran. After Akperov's resignation, figures more amicable to Tehran's influence took power, and Iran began to expand its networks.

### Al-Mustafa International University's Georgia Branch

Founded in 1979 by decree of Ali Khamenei (who would later become Iran's supreme leader), Al-Mustafa International University (AMIU) is headquartered in Qom, Iran, and operates under the direct supervision of the Office of the Supreme Leader. The Georgian branch was founded in 2007 and currently operates based on a 2011 registration by four Georgian and two Iranian nationals.<sup>13</sup> The university promotes Iran's global religious education outreach by bringing together thousands of students to its Qom campus as well as to its overseas branches for theological and ideological training. It is financed through a combination of state budget allocations, religious endowments (waqf), and funds channeled via the supreme leader's office and affiliated foundations, such as the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee and Al-Mostafa al-'Alamiyya. Iranian state media confirms that "its board of trustees is appointed by the Supreme Leader."<sup>14</sup>

The Foundation for Defense of Democracies estimates that Al Mustafa's annual budget amounts to \$100 million.<sup>15</sup> According to the foundation, the university has trained "tens of thousands

of emissaries, including many from Latin America, who are now deployed overseas to spread the word of Iran's sponsored Axis of Resistance and recruit locals to the cause of the regime's revolution."<sup>16</sup>

The United States views AI-Mustafa International University not merely as a religious institution but as a conduit for Iran's transnational ideological and security ambitions. In December 2020 when the first Trump administration designated the university under Executive Order 13224, the Treasury Department stated that the institution "enables [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF)] intelligence operations by allowing its student body, which includes large numbers of foreign and American students, to serve as an international recruitment network," and that "the IRGC-QF uses AI-Mustafa University to develop student exchanges with foreign universities for the purposes of indoctrinating and recruiting foreign sources." Treasury further wrote, "AI-Mustafa has facilitated unwitting tourists from western countries to come to Iran, from whom IRGC-QF members sought to collect intelligence."<sup>17</sup> In 2022, Canada sanctioned the university and explained that "AI-Mustafa's students are regularly recruited into the foreign legions of the Qods Force, which is the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' . . . extraterritorial operations branch."<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, the US strategic and intelligence communities do not regard the university as a conventional academic body but as an instrument of Iran's transnational ideological and paramilitary expansion. For example, in September 2025 the US House of Representatives adopted, as part of its consideration of the Fiscal Year 2026 National Defense Authorization Act, a package of amendments offered by House Armed Services Committee Chairman Mike Rogers. Among them was Amendment No. 270, introduced on the initiative of Representative Jefferson Shreve, a member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, which required the secretary of defense—in coordination with the secretary of state and the director of national intelligence—to develop and submit a strategy to counter Iran and Hezbollah's influence operations in Latin America. The amendment

explicitly referenced "Iran's AI Mustafa International University network," calling for a plan to address its activities, including consideration of terrorist or sanctions designations, in light of its identified role in radicalization and recruitment for "Iran's ideological and terrorist objectives."<sup>19</sup>

Think tank analyses, including from the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and United Against Nuclear Iran,<sup>20</sup> underline its dual function: combining theological education with recruitment for Iran's regional proxies. As Hamdi Malik writes about one of the university's branches, "Far from a normal educational institution, al-Mustafa is the Iraqi branch of a US-sanctioned Iranian entity that seeks to groom the next generation of Iraqi clerics, missionaries, pro-Iran political representatives, and pro-Iran militia members."<sup>21</sup>

A 2025 RAND report analyzed Iranian and Hezbollah activities in Latin America and found that the university helps Iran counter the US in this region. According to the report, graduates of AI-Mustafa International University direct Iran's extensive anti-US campaign, including the Spanish-language channel Hispan TV and a range of covert activities.<sup>22</sup> Iranian leadership therefore regards the institution not merely as a center of religious learning but as a strategic asset for cultivating and recruiting individuals capable of managing sophisticated ideological and operational networks abroad.

In Germany, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution investigated the Berlin branch of AIMustafa Institute, which is affiliated with the university. The office suspected the institute had spread extremism and possibly recruited spies and terrorist supporters. German security agencies also scrutinized a list of the institute's graduates for links to Iranian intelligence agencies.<sup>23</sup> In addition, PayPal suspended the institute's account due to the US Treasury Department's sanctions on it.<sup>24</sup>

AI-Mustafa International University began operating in Georgia in the 2010s and has expanded significantly in both scale and

Image 2. A 2025 Graduation of Al-Mustafa International University in Gardabani, Georgia



Notes: Graduates are presenting diplomas and wearing bands with clearly readable English and Farsi inscriptions saying, "Al-Mustafa International University – Georgia." The madrasa presents itself as "the branch of the International Al-Mustafa University in the city of Gardabani, Georgia."

Source: "სიყვარულის მახვილი"- რას აკეთებს ირანული ალ-მუსტაფას უნივერსიტეტი საქართველოში? ["Sword of love"—what is Iranian Al Mustafa University doing in Georgia?], RFE/RL, December 26, 2025, <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/რას-აკეთებს-ირანული-უნივერსიტეტი-საქართველოში/33632674.html>.

enrollment. Notably, it has never been registered as a higher educational institution in Georgia—presumably to evade the country’s comprehensive accreditation and authorization requirements. Despite lacking any formal academic status, the university functions and presents itself publicly as a university. While not in direct contradiction with the law, allowing a US-sanctioned university to flourish in Georgia contrasts with Tbilisi’s much-criticized plan to clamp down on the country’s pro-Western higher education institutions.<sup>25</sup> However, AMIU’s presence now includes three separate premises functioning as campuses (in Gardabani, Marneuli, and Tbilisi; image 2 shows images of a graduation at the Gardabani campus). This scale underscores its institutional ambition and entrenchment. According to Vladimir Narsia, a former official of the Georgian State Agency for Religious Affairs, the university could not function in Georgia without the explicit consent of the State Security Service.<sup>26</sup>

The Georgian state refers to the Al-Mustafa International University as a university in various open documents and press re-

Image 3. Hussein Yusufzadeh Speaking in Georgia



Note: Hussein Yusufzadeh is flanked by Hujjat al-Islam Sayyid Hasan Rabbani, a member of the Board of Al-Mustafa International University, at the first conference of the university's Georgian alumni in 2024.

Source: "ناتس چرگ یگدندیامن ناگتخوم اشناد ییامهدرگ نیتسرخن" [The First Gathering of the Graduates of the Georgian Representative Office], Al Mustafa News Agency, May 27, 2024, [https://news.miu.ac.ir/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/photo\\_2026-02-14\\_14-46-34.jpg](https://news.miu.ac.ir/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/photo_2026-02-14_14-46-34.jpg).

leases. For example, Zaza Vashakmadze, head of the Georgian government's Religious Affairs Agency, hosted David Qashami, whom the agency in its official press release describes as "rector" of the university in Georgia.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the agency has actively cooperated with the institution, receiving high-ranking delegations from Iran, and its officials have visited Iran and the university's headquarters. For example, Vashakmadze visited Qom already in 2018.<sup>28</sup> In 2022, the university signed a memorandum of understanding with the Caucasus International University, a private higher educational institution known for its links with the Georgian Dream.<sup>29</sup>

Image 4. Hussein Yusufzadeh with Ayatollah Ali Khamenei



Note: Yusufzadeh often boasted of his direct association with Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Source: Hussein Yusufzade's private Instagram profile.

Iranian citizen Hussein Yusufzadeh (see images 3 and 4) has been positioning himself as the official university's "representative" in Georgia, and Georgian authorities treat him as such. In his personal Instagram profile, Yusufzadeh casts himself as the "university manager" and openly presents the university as his institutional affiliation.<sup>30</sup> He was apparently replaced by another Iranian national, Yousef Nezhad, at the end of 2025 (see image 5).<sup>31</sup>

The leadership of Al-Mustafa International University has demonstrated a keen and sustained interest in Georgia, underscored by the high-level engagement and strategic priority it accords to expanding its footprint in the Black Sea nation. The university's infrastructure in the country also focuses on recruiting successful students for advanced studies in Iran and offering them schol-

Image 5. The New Representative of Al Mustafa University in Georgia, Yousef Nezhad



Source: "The First Gathering of the Graduates of the Georgian Representative Office."

Image 6. Ali Abbasi Being Received by Zaza Vashakmadze



Source: State Agency for Religious Affairs.

arships.<sup>32</sup> Two official visits to Georgia illustrate this commitment: in March 2016 and March 2019, the university's president, Hujjat al-Islam Dr. Ali Abbasi, visited the country. He is a pivotal figure in Iran's global religious-education network, where AMIU serves as both operational hub and diplomatic cover.

One of the university's priorities was to establish cordial relations with the Georgian Orthodox Church's patriarchate. In March 2016, Patriarch Ilia II himself received Dr. Abbasi.<sup>33</sup> In 2019, Abbasi paid another visit to Georgia to tour the Iranian influence infrastructure. Abbasi was also hosted by Zaza Vashakmadze, chair of the State Agency for Religious Affairs (see image 6).<sup>34</sup>

Abbasi continued intensive engagement with Georgia by hosting several delegations of Shia clerics and educators from Georgia. For example, in February 2022, he hosted a delegation headed by the then Sheikh of Shia Muslims Ramin Idigov.<sup>35</sup> In 2024, he hosted another high-ranking delegation headed by the new sheikh, Faig Nabiev, as well as leaders of Georgia's Sunni community (see image 7).<sup>36</sup>

Image 7. Ali Abbasi Hosting a Delegation of Georgian Muslim Leaders



Note: Ali Abbasi is in the center, and the Muslim leaders include Gurban Merkuзов (second from left); Akhundi of Imam Hassan Mosque in Kizilajlo, Marneuli, Aziz Nabiev (fourth from left); Chair of Alul Beyt Cultural-Educational Society in Tbilisi Faig Nabiev (sixth from left); Sheikh of Eastern Georgia Adam Shantadze (fourth from right); Sunni Mufti of West Georgia Rakhid Karimov (second from right); and Akhundi of Aly Beyt Mosque in Ponichala, Tbilisi.

Source: h.usef6 (@h.usef6), Instagram post, February 27, 2024, [https://www.instagram.com/p/C32dMRfNJd/?img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/C32dMRfNJd/?img_index=1).

Image 8. Al-Mustafa International University Branch in Tbilisi



Source: Palitra TV.

After the United States placed sanctions on Al-Mustafa International University, the institution briefly lowered its profile. But it resurfaced and expanded operations to three campuses. At its Tbilisi campus, the university operates premises in the district of Ponichala, and a sign above its gates clearly states in Georgian and English that it is a branch of AMIU in Georgia (see image 8).

In Marneuli, the university's facility is integrated with the premises of the Imam Reza Madrasa, a key Shia institution focused on religious education that was established in 1997. After Faig Nabiev became the sheikh of eastern Georgia, government authorities granted a permit to demolish the old small building, and very quickly an ambitious large building was constructed to

Image 9. Graduation Ceremony at the Gardabani Campus of Al-Mustafa International University in Georgia



Source: h.usef® (@h.usef®), Instagram post, May 26, 2025, [https://www.instagram.com/p/DKFWFtySb/?img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/DKFWFtySb/?img_index=1).

Image 10. An Advertisement for Al-Mustafa International University in Georgia

**Əl-Mustafa Təhsil Mərkəzi tələbə qəbulu elan edir**

*Səntəbr ayının 1-dən etibarən tələbə qəbuluna başlanılır!*

Beynəlxalq Əl-Mustafa (s) Universitetinin dünyada olan nümayəndəlikləri arasında Gürcüstanda 20 ilə yaxın fəaliyyət göstərən Əl-Mustafa (s) elm-təhsil mərkəzi yer alır. Tbilisi, Marneuli və Qardabani şəhərində həmin təhsil mərkəzləri yerləşir. Bu mərkəzlərdə qız və oğlan tələbələr üçün dini və dünyəvi fənlər tədris edilməklə yanaşı tələbələr pulsuz yemək və nəqliyyat vasitələri ilə təmin olunur. Həmçinin ziyarət və ekskursiyalar, bilik və idman yarışmaları da təşkil edilir.

Əziz gənclər, dininizi öyrənmək və əxlaqi-mənəvi dəyərlərinizi yüksəltmək istəyirsinizsə sizin üçün yaradılmış bu şəraitdən istifadə edə bilərsiniz.

+995 593 98 57 48  
+995 577 50 12 65

Note: The advertisement invites applications to the university's three centers in Tbilisi, Marneuli, and Gardabani. It stresses that the education covers religious and "general" subjects. "Dear youth, if you wish to acquire both scientific knowledge and moral-spiritual education, you can apply to study with us," the ad says while also specifying that students are offered free meals and accommodation.

Source: Authors' research.

replace the old one, which allowed for a significant expansion of space and operations. In Gardabani, the university facilities are integrated with the Al Hikmet Madrassa (see image 9 for a photo from this location). The campuses in both Marneuli and Gardabani offer students food and board (see image 10).

Al-Mustafa International University's efforts to cultivate an alumni network reveal its long-term strategy in Georgia. This network

Image 11. The First Conference of Graduates of Al-Mustafa International University in Georgia



Source: "ئاتسجرجرگ یگدن یمان ناگتخوم! شناد ییامهدرگ نیتسخن" [The first gathering of graduates of the Al-Mustafa International University's Georgia branch was held with the participation of a member of the University's board of trustees], Al Mustafa News Agency, May 27, 2024, <https://news.miu.ac.ir/?p=24812>.

is creating a key strategic footprint, and during its inaugural gathering on May 27, 2024, over 120 graduates attended (see image 11). The event featured Ayatollah Seyyed Hassan Rabbani (Khorasani), a university trustee, and a senior organizational figure from Iran.<sup>37</sup> Sources familiar with the gathering indicated that the number of so-called graduates of the AMIU network in Georgia is higher, and only "distinguished" graduates of the university gathered in honor of the high-ranking guest. Through such sustained efforts, the university is systematically nurturing a community infused with Iran's ideological and political doctrines, thereby ensuring the endurance of its influence.

In January 2023, another high-ranking guest from Iran—the abovementioned Ayatollah Ramezani, who is secretary-general of Ahl Al-Bayt World Assembly—visited the university (see image 12). He met with its faculty and stressed the need to expand Islamic instruction and the pool of teachers.

An increasing number of delegations from Georgia to Iran are also visiting the university's headquarters in Qom. Most recently,

Image 12. Ayatollah Reza Ramazani Meeting Faculty of Al-Mustafa International University in Georgia



Source: Al-Mustafa International University – Georgia.

leaders from the Administration of All Muslims of Georgia visited the central campus. The Georgian government has de facto oversight of this body, and it is led by Sheikh Faig Nabiev, who previously chaired Alul Beyt Cultural-Educational Society, an Iranian organization affiliated with the ABWA and a central element of its network in Georgia.<sup>38</sup>

Al-Mustafa International University and its Iranian leadership clearly view the institution as a strategic asset. It gives them a long-term foothold in Georgia and can help Tehran expand both an institutional presence and a loyal community shaped by the Islamic Republic's ideological worldview. And given that in other parts of the world Al-Mustafa graduates have been implicated in or directly involved with Iran's covert operations, the university's unregulated and expanding activities in Georgia pose tangible national security risks. By indoctrinating a new generation with its worldview, Tehran can use the university to build a reservoir of potential recruits who can advance its geopolitical and intelligence objectives under the guise of cultural and religious outreach.

### Ahl al-Bayt World Assembly's Georgia Branch

The Ahl al-Bayt World Assembly, often transliterated as *Ahli Beyt*, is an Iranian government-linked and -financed international network founded in 1990 under the personal supervision of the late Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Officially registered as a cultural and religious nongovernmental organization, it promotes the teachings of Shia Islam and the House of the Prophet (*Ahl al-Bayt*) through conferences, publications, and educational programs.

In practice, the assembly serves as one of the principal vehicles of Iran's global ideological outreach, frequently advancing Tehran's political narratives and echoing the Islamic Republic's foreign policy goals. US and allied intelligence assessments view the Ahl al-Bayt network as part of Iran's influence apparatus, operating alongside the IRGC and the Quds Force, but often used to groom ideological recruits. For example, in a 2015 testimony to the US House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Scott Modell, then managing director of the Rapidan Group and a former Central Intelligence Agency officer, said ABWA was "ostensibly set up to promote Iran's revolutionary ideology overseas and to serve as a link between the Iranian clerical establishment and foreign Shia clerics. However, ABWA has also served as an effective cover for assisting with intelligence-gathering; spotting and recruiting foreign students; and moving money and materiel destined for Quds Force (and MOIS [Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security]) operations." He added that "Qods Force commanders rely on entities such as ABWA" to support their operational and ideological activities abroad.<sup>39</sup> Open-source analyses describe the assembly as a "front" for cultivating pro-Iranian elites and building ideological infrastructure in Shia and mixed-faith societies.<sup>40</sup>

The ABWA has also been directly linked with Hezbollah. For example, Hezbollah's now late Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah was a member of ABWA's Supreme Council. Hassan Akhtari, once tapped as "the operational father" of Hezbollah, himself served as the fourth secretary-general of ABWA.<sup>41</sup>

Image 13. Ayatollah Reza Ramezani Meeting and Zaza Vashakmadze



Notes: Ayatollah Reza Ramezani and Zaza Vashakmadze are in the center. To the right of Ramezani stands Mahmud Addibi, ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran to Georgia. First from left is Hussein Yusufzadeh, representative of Al-Mustafa International University in Georgia. To his right is Rasim Mamedov.

Source: State Agency of Religious Affairs of Georgia.

Sheikh Haji Rasim Mamedov (frequently transliterated in Iranian sources as Rasem Mohammadev) founded the Ahl al-Bayt Cultural-Educational Society in Marneuli in 2001. He was among the first Georgian citizens to train at the Islamic Republic's religious educational institutions, including at Al-Mustafa International University.<sup>42</sup> Formally registered in 2013—just months after Georgian Dream took power—ABWA has since exploded in scope, becoming the central umbrella for Tehran-backed educational and cultural operations.<sup>43</sup> It now encompasses four madrasas (including two women's madrassas), several charity funds, and a sprawling alumni network. The assembly dominates mosque staffing with regime-loyal akhunds while directly influencing their worldviews and discourse. Much of this activity unfolds informally, with Iran's political agenda and infiltration delicately wrapped in a religious and educational garb. For example, various parts of ABWA's ecosystem in Georgia feature portraits of the late supreme leader and other regime symbols on their premises or at their organized events. The ABWA web-

site describes the Caucasus as being in a "sensitive geographical and civilizational, geostrategic position."<sup>44</sup> The assembly's Georgia network is a key component of Iran's strategy to turn the country into a strategic linchpin from which it can project its ideological and organizational influence across the Caucasus to push out US influence.

The organization cooperates closely with Georgian authorities, particularly the State Agency for Religious Issues. Without the government's consent, it could not operate its extensive infrastructure, secure necessary permits, or conduct its plethora of public events and activities effectively.

The ABWA's head, Ayatollah Reza Ramezani, visited Georgia for five days in 2023, revealing the cooperative relationship with the Georgian government. Escorted by assembly officials and the Iranian ambassador, Ramezani held direct talks with Vashakmadze from the State Agency for Religious Issues (see image 13).<sup>45</sup> Bishop of Gori Andria Gvazava, who is known for his anti-Western views, also hosted Ramazani in the patriarchate of Georgia. "The meeting was held in a friendly atmosphere and spiritual challenges in the world were discussed," the patriarchate said in a statement.<sup>46</sup>

Crucially, before becoming secretary-general of the Ahl al-Bayt World Assembly, Ramazani served as the director of the Islamic Center Hamburg in Germany from 2009 to 2018. The German Federal Ministry of the Interior banned this center and its sub-organizations as part of a crackdown on Iranian intelligence activities, especially after the October 7 attack on Israel. According to the ministry, the center constituted an "extremist Islamist organisation which pursues anti-constitutional aims."<sup>47</sup> The decision was backed by comprehensive investigations, including raids on 53 properties across multiple federal states, which exposed extensive links to extremist networks.<sup>48</sup>

When commenting on the decision to ban the center, the then-Federal Interior Minister Nancy Faeser stated that the

Image 14. Ayatollah Reza Ramezani Speaking in Marneuli



Notes: Standing with a microphone is Kamran Mamedov, a young local cleric who received higher education in Iran. Seated to his right is Rasim Mamedov.

Source: "یلوئ نرام رهش نایعی شی اب یناضمر ملل تآ تسشن یربخ سکع" [Meeting of Ayatollah Ramazani with the Shia Community of Marneuli, Georgia], Ahl-ul-Bayt World Assembly, <https://www.ahl-ul-bayt.org/zsl/12118>.



Note: The townhall in Marneuli, Georgia, is packed during the address of Ayatollah Reza Ramezani.

Source: "Meeting of Ayatollah Ramazani with the Shia Community of Marneuli, Georgia."

center "promotes an Islamist-extremist, totalitarian ideology in Germany. This Islamist ideology is opposed to human dignity." She added:

The Islamisches Zentrum Hamburg [Islamic Center Hamburg] and its sub-organisations also support the terrorists of Hezbollah and spread aggressive antisemitism. Following the comprehensive searches in November 2023, our security authorities carefully analysed the seized material. The evidence gathered in these very difficult and time-consuming investigations confirmed the serious suspicions to such a degree that we ordered the ban today. With this ban, we have put a stop to the activities of these Islamist extremists. This is another serious blow to Islamist extremism.<sup>49</sup>

While Ramazani was no longer the head of the Islamic Center Hamburg at the time of its closure, he is the figure who presided

over and masterminded its nine-year expansion into what German authorities ultimately concluded was an acute threat to the federal republic's national security. Today, Ramezani remains a significant figure in Iran's power projection and propaganda efforts. During a 2022 press conference, he illustrated his vision by comparing the work of media to a kind of "Jihad." He said, "Today, Movement in the field of media is a kind of jihad and can play an important role in the Jihad of Enlightenment."<sup>50</sup> The significance of Ramazani's role in Iran's infiltration efforts adds a particular dimension to his visit to and continuous engagement with Georgia.

During Ramezani's visit, a packed assembly at Ahl al-Bayt's Marneuli headquarters saw the Georgia branch deliver its two-year activity report directly to him—confirming his role as the network's ultimate overseer (see image 14). After scrutiny, Ramezani declared that Georgia is the strategic "base" for Caucasus operations and mandated a detailed 10-year master plan

with clear targets and accountability. His visit shows that both he and the Ahl al-Bayt World Assembly view Georgia as a top priority, which represents a long-term pivot for Tehran's regional agenda and long-term vision.<sup>51</sup>

Following the visit, Ramazani continued to engage with Georgia, underscoring that the country is a priority for the ABWA. For example, in November 2024, Ramazani hosted a group of Shia imams from Georgia—most of whom were reportedly members of pro-Iranian networks in the country—at his headquarters in Qom. During the meeting, he discussed Hassan Nasrallah, the Hezbollah leader killed during an Israeli air strike in September 2024: “Martyr Nasrallah set a new record of resistance. He was a perfect example of Jihad for the sake of Allah. The fact that a follower of [Ahl al-Bayt] shined so much so that he could expand the Resistance Front, is the pride of the Islamic world.”<sup>52</sup> He encouraged the imams to work with the youth and said they would undergo a particular course in “attracting young people and communicating with them.”<sup>53</sup> During the same visit in other meetings—including one with Zeinab, Ahl al-Bayt's women's organization in Georgia—Ramazani stressed the need to cultivate a new generation of teachers and educators. He prioritized capacity-building initiatives that would enhance outreach, and called for communication strategies tailored to distinct audiences and adapted to modern digital platforms.<sup>54</sup>

The Ahl al-Bayt World Assembly's Georgia branch has also hosted prominent Iranian dignitaries and regime figures who visit the country. These trips, which have occurred regularly for several years, are part of a deliberate and systematic process and underscore Iran's growing footprint in the country. In one notable trip, Masoud Pezeshkian, who is now the current Iranian president, traveled to Marneuli, where he appeared alongside Georgian Dream politician and current Tbilisi City Council Chairman Zurab Abashidze.

Furthermore, the ABWA serves as an umbrella for four Shia madrasas operating in Georgia, supervises their functioning and

instruction, and steers their overall ideological line. Mirroring the playbook of other Iran-controlled madrasas, all four madrasas routinely feature informal teatime and social gatherings, which center on international politics, Iran's strategic interests, Islam's adversaries, and regime-defined justice. The madrasas are also adorned with Iran's state symbols and portraits of its political leaders, underscoring how they are part of Tehran's foreign policy agenda.

Though not formally part of the Ahl al-Bayt network, two youth organizations are squarely part of its ecosystem: Georgian Muslim Youth Union (GMYU) and the Union of Georgian Students in Qom, Iran (UGSQ).

The GMYU—formerly the Ibrahim Mujtaba Youth Union—is a Shia youth organization founded in 2020 and headquartered in the Imam Hussein Mosque in Marneuli, a facility constructed in 2016 with direct funding from Iranian cleric Seyed Javad Shahrestani.<sup>55</sup> Operating as a dynamic recruitment and ideological outreach organization, the GMYU maintains a sophisticated network of so-called youth influencers who systematically engage and enlist prominent young individuals across Georgia's Shia communities. It reportedly has 40 active members in Marneuli city according to its Facebook page, and has other chapters in village mosques. The transformation of the organization from Ibrahim Mujtaba Youth Union into a more ambitious-sounding Georgian Muslim Youth Union indicates the initiative's success.

Working closely with the country's expanding pro-Iranian religious-educational ecosystem—including the Imam Reza Madrasa and Al-Mustafa International University—the GMYU serves as a strategic grooming and mobilization platform. It organizes frequent seminars, theological discussions, sermons, and exclusive meetings with visiting Islamic scholars. The union also cultivates a robust social media presence through curated video content that promotes its distinct Twelver Shia worldview.

In one meeting, members of the union met with Haji Mehdi Rasuli, a religious reciter of Ahl al-Bayt who specializes in maddahi

Image 15. Georgian Muslim Youth Union Meet Haji Mehdi Rasuli



Source: Gürcüstan Müsəlmanları Gənclər Birliyi GMGB, Facebook post, August 13, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/ibrahim.muctaba.birliyi/posts/pfbid027D4qXpYQ9M5U5NIN3ZsKgoz6BNf-NXQqANbMfqB63nSSyb4djt7qjnkToFIMR7VCI>.

devotional elegies and lamentations honoring Imam Hussein (see image 15). “Haji’s deeply moving sermon was observed to have inspired a renewed spiritual fervor among the youth,” says the press release on the union’s social media account.<sup>56</sup>

By bridging formal madrasa education with grassroots youth activism, the GMYU amplifies and extends the broader Iranian soft-power network in Georgia, transforming ideological instruction into sustained community influence and long-term allegiance.

The Union of Georgian Students in Qom is another pivotal component of this ecosystem. It is a dedicated networking and support platform for Georgian youth who were recruited to pursue advanced Shia theological studies in Iran’s preeminent religious hub of Qom. UGSQ’s existence signals that a substantial and sustained pipeline of Georgian students is flowing into Iran’s clerical training centers.

The organization provides comprehensive logistical and social infrastructure, assisting recruits with administrative formalities, ac-

commodation, and peer networking (see image 16). It also helps them participate in high-profile religious events and introduces them to influential figures within Qom’s scholarly and political circles. By streamlining integration and amplifying access, the UGSQ reinforces the recruitment-to-return cycle, ensuring that graduates returning to Georgia help Iran promote its ideological influence within the country’s pro-Iranian networks. Its social media channels prominently feature devotional graphics honoring Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, signaling the group’s ideological alignment and pro-Iranian orientation (see image 17).

Islamic cleric Haji Rasim Mamedov, a key figure in the network of pro-Iran organizations (see image 18), heads Ahl al-Bayt World Assembly in Georgia. As already stated, he founded the Georgia branch of ABWA in 2001,<sup>57</sup> and since then, its activities and footprint have expanded considerably.

Mamedov has appeared on the US No Fly List since 2019, according to evidence reviewed by the authors. The list, maintained by the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s Terrorist Screen-

Image 16. Members of the Union of Georgian Students in Qom Attend a 2023 Book Fair in Tehran



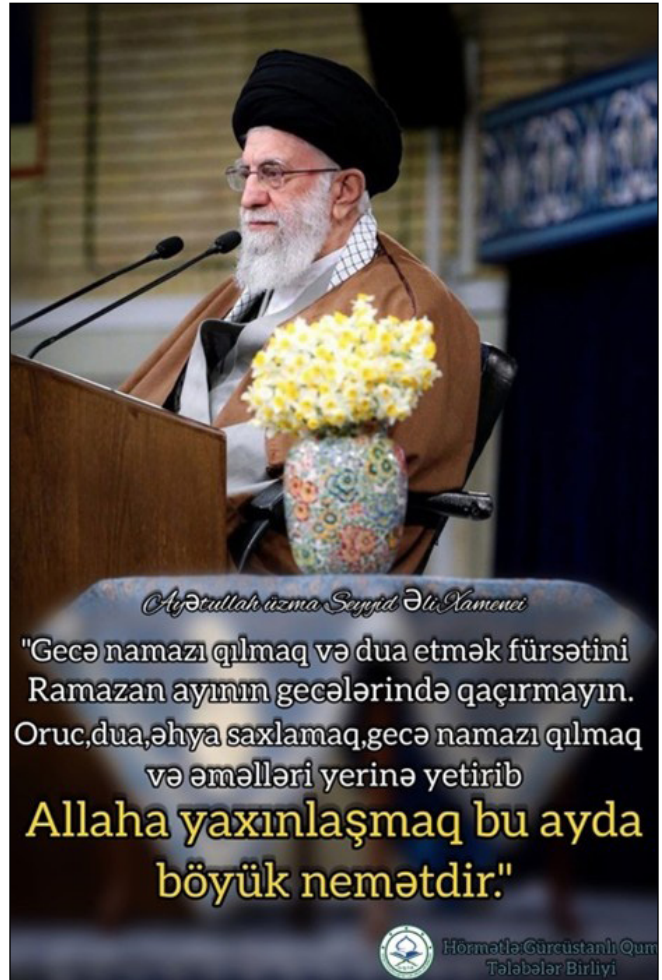
Source: Gürcüstanlı Qum Tələbələri Birliyi [Union of Georgian Students in Qom], Facebook post, May 16, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1AfG7giqMn/>.

ing Center, bars individuals deemed to be potential security risks from boarding commercial aircraft traveling to, from, or within the United States. Inclusion on the list does not necessarily indicate criminal charges or confirmed wrongdoing, and the reasons behind specific entries are classified and rarely disclosed. So while the underlying rationale for Mamedov's designation remains undisclosed, his presence on the list indicates that he has come to the attention of US authorities.

The assembly Mamedov heads presents itself as a politically neutral institution devoted solely to promoting Shia Islam and "helping to grow and reform the intellectual, cultural, political, economic and social status of followers of the Ahlul Bayt."<sup>58</sup> However, an analysis of open sources shows its leaders' true views and affiliations.

For example, Mamedov attended a 2023 conference in Iran dedicated to Qasem Soleimani, the Iranian major general who led the IRGC-QF and was killed by a US airstrike in Iraq

Image 17. A Graphic Featuring Ayatollah Khamenei from the Facebook Page of the Union of Georgian Students in Qom



Source: Gürcüstanlı Qum Tələbələri Birliyi [Union of Georgian Students in Qom], Facebook post, March 26, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1RzQ3zKxyj/>.

in 2020. It was titled, "Martyr Soleimani, Global Hero of Resistance." Speaking in an interview with the Ahl al-Bayt World Assembly Persian website, Mamedov spoke in detail about the need to popularize Soleimani's deeds amongst young people in Georgia, specifically by publishing books about the general. He claimed that Georgian Muslim youth had "love and affection" for "Martyr Soleimani." Mamedov added:

Image 18. Rasim Mamedov (Second from Right) Participates in the Georgian Dream Election Campaign in 2012



Source: Authors' research.

Image 19. Imam Haji Hajiev Delivering a Eulogy to Qasem Soleimani



Source: "Marneulida Qasim Süleymani və Mübariz İbrahimov üçün anım mərasimi keçirilib" [A memorial ceremony has been held in Marneuli for Qasem Soleimani and Mubarez Ibrahimov], 24news.ge, January 6, 2020, <https://24news.ge/read/id/18284>.

The main reason for this affection is his fight against Takfiri [infidel] currents—even non-Muslim Georgians say that if Hajj Qasem had not fought Takfiris in Iraq and Syria, the terrorists might have reached Georgia too; for this reason they feel affinity for this great martyr and consider Martyr Soleimani as sharing in their country's security.<sup>59</sup>

Verifying that young Muslims in Georgia have “love and affection” for Qasem Soleimani is difficult. But the ABWA and its affiliates have consistently and publicly incorporated references to the general into their broader ideological, educational, and religious outreach activities. So they are deliberately trying to normalize and valorize Soleimani's legacy as part of Tehran's soft-power and indoctrination strategy in the South Caucasus.

For example, in 2020 Mamedov hosted a presentation of the Azerbaijani translation of a book about Soleimani. The event, held at the office of Ahl al-Bayt World Assembly in Marneuli, was attended by Sheikh Ramin Egidov, then head of the Administration of All Muslims of Georgia, and Hassan Yusufzadeh,

the aforementioned manager of Al-Mustafa International University in Georgia.<sup>60</sup> Speaking at the event, Edigov announced the launch of a “book reading competition for this valuable work,” including prizes for winners. He stated:

This book explores the importance of monotheism and sincerity, as well as the concept of the Great Jihad, through the teachings and words of Imam Khomeini and the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution. The second part, based on the testament of the martyr, provides a comprehensive examination of the school of Haj Qassem Soleimani—a school whose core principles are sincerity, monotheism, and the Great Jihad.<sup>61</sup>

In another example, Imam Ali Mosque in Marneuli—a flagship mosque of ABWA in the region that is integrated into the Ahl al-Bayt infrastructure and has Mamedov as its akhund—hosted a memorial service to Soleimani on January 6, 2021.<sup>62</sup> Earlier, the mosque's imam, Haji Hajiev, who is one of the most influential Shia clerics in Georgia, said, “Qasem Soleimani was killed by

Image 20. Rakhid Karimov Delivering Eulogy of Hassan Nasrallah in Tbilisi



Rakhid Kerimov, Akhund of Ahli Bayt Mosque in Tbilisi delivering eulogy to Hassan Nasrallah. Tbilisi, October 4, 2024.

Source: Ehli - Beyt Mescidi, Facebook post, October 4, 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=1109453831006269&set=pcb.1109465844338401>.

Image 22. Haji Hajiev Delivering Eulogy of Hassan Nasrallah, Flanked by His Banner



Source: "Marneulidə Həsən Nəsrullahın anım mərasimi keçirilib" [A memorial ceremony for Hassan Nasrallah was held in Marneuli], 24News.ge, October 5, 2024, <https://24news.ge/read/id/93442>.

Image 21. Georgia's Current Shia Sheikh Faig Nabiev Seen Attending the Commemoration of Hassan Nasrallah in Ahli Bayt Mosque in Tbilisi on October 4, 2024



Source: Ehli - Beyt Mescidi, Facebook post, October 4, 2024.

Image 23. Members of the Imam Ali Mosque Listening to a Eulogy of Hassan Nasrallah



Source: Al Mustafa News Agency.

Image 24. Hassan Yusufzadeh and Rakhid Karimov Delivering a Presentation about Hassan Nasrallah to Participants of a Conference



Source: Al Mustafa News Agency.

Image 25. Participants of a Conference, Some of Whom Are Young, Listen to Presentations about Hassan Nasrallah.



Source: Al Mustafa News Agency.

the most despicable, evil, and cruel people in the world” (see image 19). He added:

It is true that Qasem Soleimani and those who were with him were killed, but this death will one day shake the very foundations of the oppressors. Just as the blood of Imam Hussein shook the foundations of Bani Umayyah’s rule, the blood of Qasem Soleimani will shake the foundations of the regimes of Saudi Arabia, the United States, and Israel.<sup>63</sup>

In addition to the ABWA events lionizing Soleimani and promoting an anti-American political agenda amongst Georgia’s Shia Muslims, the Iranian embassy in Tbilisi has hosted regular events dedicated to Soleimani that are attended by “leaders of the Georgian Shia community,” including ABWA representatives.<sup>64</sup>

The Ahl al-Bayt World Assembly’s infrastructure in Georgia has also glorified Hassan Nasrallah (see images 20–25). During

one such ceremony at Imam Ali Mosque on October 5, 2024, several prominent figures of the pro-Iranian religious network spoke—including Haji Hajiev, one of the key Iran-linked Shia clerics in Georgia.<sup>65</sup> Another event on the same subject was held in the Ahl al-Bayt Mosque in Tbilisi, a flagship institution of ABWA’s infrastructure in Georgia. Rakhid Karimov, the mosque’s akhund and a close friend of Faig Nabiev (a sheikh of eastern Georgia), spoke at the event and said, “Hassan Nasrallah’s struggle for truth and justice was not only of regional, but also of global significance.” He referred to Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah as a martyr of Jerusalem and thanked Khamenei for the so-called Operation True Promise 2—the large-scale missile and drone strike against Israel on October 1, 2024, which, according to Rakhimov, brought “comfort to the oppressed Muslim ummah.” He thus explicitly endorsed Iran’s military action and leadership.

The Ahl al-Bayt Mosque in Tbilisi also regularly hosts Iran’s ambassadors to Georgia and features various propaganda

materials of Iran's leadership, including the late Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

### Arbaeen Pilgrimage Trips to Karbala, Iraq

A cornerstone of the Ahl al-Bayt organization's long-term investment in Georgia is the systematic organization of Shia pilgrimages to Karbala, Iraq—one of the holiest sites in Twelver Islam and the epicenter of the annual Arbaeen commemoration (see image 26). Iran and its special services use these trips as opportunities to recruit and influence Georgians. In Georgia, local network operatives actively identify, incentivize, and mobilize participants, often rewarding loyalty with subsidized travel.

This practice aligns with a pattern of Iranian security services, particularly the IRGC and Quds Force: exploiting mass pilgrimages to recruit intelligence operatives and proxies. In 2024, an investigation citing British and Israeli intelligence sources exposed how IRGC recruiters systematically approached British Shia pilgrims (primarily of Lebanese, Iraqi, or Pakistani descent) during Arbaeen in Karbala. The Iranians tasked them with conducting espionage against Jewish communities, regime dissidents, and Western-aligned figures back home.<sup>66</sup>

Image 26. Pilgrims from Georgia in Karbala



Source: Ehl-i-Bayt Mescidi, Facebook post, September 23, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1DeasZMzPH/>.

In Georgia, the Ahl al-Bayt network has excelled at organizing these fully funded trips. Pilgrims travel by bus from Georgia through Turkey to Iran and then enter Iraq. Notably, hundreds of Azerbaijani pilgrims travel through Georgia, settling first in Marneuli to rest and undergo preparation before continuing to Turkey, Iran, and Iraq. Photos of Iran's political leadership displayed at the preparation venues highlight Tehran's influence over the process (see image 27). Most of the participants in Marneuli stayed at the Iran-funded Imam Hussein Mosque, which also provided food and hosted seminars and discussions.

According to the Ahl al-Bayt Mosque in Tbilisi, over 200 Georgians participated in the pilgrimage in 2022. In 2025, the figure reached 1,000, reflecting the undertaking's scale and growth.<sup>68</sup> Pro-Iranian mosques, youth groups, and aligned media outlets aggressively promote these tours, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of participation and ideological alignment.<sup>69</sup> The expansion of these pilgrimages heightens Georgia's exposure to poten-

Image 27. Pilgrims Gather at Imam Ali Mosque in Marneuli



Notes: The Facebook page of the Imam Ali Fund sharing this photo said, "As in the past several years, this year too, the Imam Ali (a.s.) [*alayhi al-salam*, or "peace be upon him"] Mosque hosted hundreds of Karbala pilgrims who came from the Republic of Azerbaijan, and today it bid farewell to its guests as they departed for those sacred lands."<sup>67</sup> Note the photo of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Source: Gürcüstan İmam Əli Adına Xeyriyyə Fondu [Georgia Imam Ali Charity Fund], Facebook post, August 2, 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1EkLseRKJb/>.

### Box 1. The Weaponization of Imam Hussein: From Sacred Martyrdom to IRGC Indoctrination

Iran—through entities like the IRGC, the ABWA, and cultural or educational networks—leverages Imam Hussein (or Husayn ibn Ali) as a central motif in its propaganda and indoctrination efforts. (This revered figure, who was Prophet Muhammad’s grandson and the third Shia imam, was martyred at Karbala in 680 CE.) Such messaging grooms Shia Muslims by framing Hussein’s martyrdom as a timeless symbol of resistance against tyranny and aligning it with Iran’s revolutionary ideology. This helps Tehran foster loyalty and mobilize participation in events like Arbæen pilgrimages. Ultimately, the propaganda helps Iran recruit members for its proxy militias or intelligence networks. Tehran also politicizes Hussein’s narrative to equate contemporary “oppressors” (e.g., the United States) with historical villains like Yazid ibn Mu’awiya, encouraging Shia youth to view IRGC-backed actions as sacred duties.

tial intelligence penetration, proxy cultivation, and long-term soft-power entrenchment by Tehran.

### Tasua Procession: Manifestation of Iranian Influence in Georgia

One of the most visible manifestations of Iran’s growing influence in Georgia is Tasua, an annual religious march organized by the Ahl al-Bayt World Assembly and personally overseen by

Rasim Mamedov. The Tasua religious march is a major Shia Muslim procession held on the ninth day of Muharram, the day before Ashura. It commemorates the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, in the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE (for more on how Iran exploits this martyrdom, see box 1).

In Marneuli, ABWA and the Imam Ali Mosque jointly organize the procession, which begins at the assembly’s office and ends

Image 28. An anti-Donald Trump and anti-Benjamin Netanyahu Banner at the Tasua Procession in Marneuli



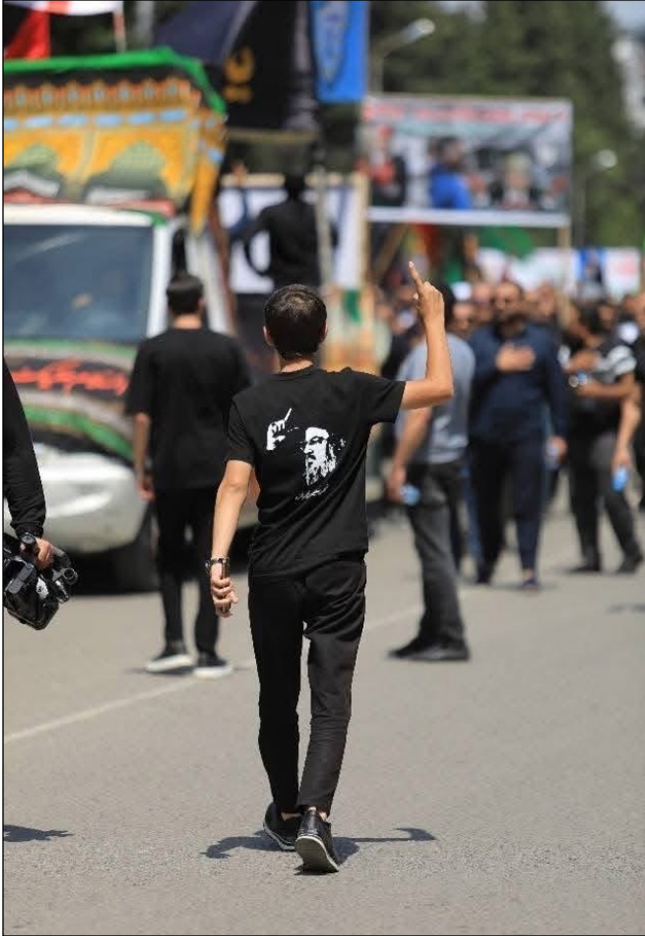
Source: Interpress.ge, Facebook post, July 5, 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/interpressge/posts/pfbid032ENZ6j7pHZ31Ys3ndhh8R3qACZ2V5dHgezcz1rVBKcMcf9sMQD5bFN-vSZGeS7Nrl>.

Image 29. Banner of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei at the Tasua Procession in Marneuli



Source: Interpress.GE, Facebook post, July 5, 2025.

Image 30. A Young Participant of the 2025 Tasua Procession Wears a T-shirt Featuring Hassan Nasrallah with an Anti-Trump Banner in the Background



Source: 24News.ge.

at the mosque. This cooperation underscores the institutions' close links, even though the mosque presents itself as an independent institution not subordinate to the sheikh of the Administration of Muslims of All Georgia, whom it considers too close to the government.

The procession in 2025, held shortly after Israeli-US airstrikes on Iran, was the largest ever and displayed anti-American,

anti-Trump, and pro-Iranian messages, which underscored Iran's deepening foothold in Georgia. Participants carried large banners depicting President Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu with blood-stained hands and an inscription saying, "Stop killing children" (see image 28). Other banners featured Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, while groups of young participants wore T-shirts bearing the image of Hassan Nasrallah (see images 29 and 30). The 2025 march also contrasted with those of previous years, which did not feature overt expression of the Islamic Republic's anti-American political agenda.<sup>70</sup>

While such demonstrations may be commonplace elsewhere, they were unprecedented in Georgia. Their emergence in the country vividly illustrates the decline of America's influence and the expansion of Iran's.

#### Alul Beyt Cultural-Educational Society (Tbilisi)

The Alul Beyt Cultural-Educational Society, which is registered as a cultural educational community organization, is one of Iran's principal institutional outposts of its extensive network in Georgia.<sup>71</sup> Although the organization is a separate entity, it is closely integrated into Tehran's network. Georgia's current Shia Sheikh Faig Nabiev registered it as a non-profit NGO in 2014, which highlights Iran's increased influence in the country's Shia community.<sup>72</sup> Earlier, he registered the entity as a limited liability company in 2002 under the same name and listed himself as the director.<sup>73</sup> Currently, Nabiev's brother, Aziz Nabiev, chairs the organization.

Unlike Ahl al-Bayt World Assembly, Alul Beyt has almost no social media presence and is a smaller institution. But it is directly linked with the ABWA and functions as the assembly's de facto liaison office in Georgia. It manages ties with the Iranian Cultural Centre, Al-Mustafa International University, the embassy of Iran, and other clerical and media institutions. For example, it hosted Ayatollah Shahristani during his high-profile visit to Georgia.<sup>74</sup> The society also performs a quasi-think-tank role.

Image 31. Visit of an Iranian delegation to Georgia in 2015



Notes: Second from the right is Massoud Pezeshkian. To his right is Zurab Abashidze, a Georgian Dream politician and the current chairman of Tbilisi City Council. First from the left is Gia Tsagareishvili, another Georgian Dream politician who is currently the deputy minister of health. Source: Given to authors.

Notably, in 2014 Alul Beyt hosted a delegation of Iranian clerics and parliamentarians that included Masoud Pezeshkian, 10 years before he became president (see image 31). This event was an early indicator that Tehran was cultivating its footprint in Georgia in a strategic manner.<sup>75</sup>

Comparable organizations in other countries have often served as covers for Iranian intelligence or influence operations. Given that pattern, the Alul Beyt Cultural-Educational Society could plausibly perform a similar dual function in Georgia by blending outreach with Tehran's strategic objectives.

So Nabiev's Alul Beyt complements Mamedov's Ahl al-Bayt in Marneuli. The former provides the institutional interface for Iran's formal cultural diplomacy, while the latter implements grassroots mobilization and religious propagation. Together they form two halves of a coordinated system that projects Tehran's ideological and cultural presence within Georgia under the guise of education and interfaith dialogue.

### Iran-Linked Charitable Foundations

Charitable foundations linked to Iran constitute a primary node within the regime's global network of NGOs and other institutions that promote its agenda. Despite international sanctions, entities in third countries have functioned as financial pipelines, sustaining influence campaigns—including madrassa networks—via opaque cash flows. The most prominent example is the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee, which the US sanctioned in 2007 for diverting funds to Hezbollah and Hamas.<sup>76</sup> Operating as supposed charities, these organizations often exploit informal donations, religious gatherings, and relief programs, and their transactions become effectively untraceable.<sup>77</sup>

Four Iran-affiliated foundations operate in Georgia, and all have been registered since 2012 (see table 1). Notably, the Georgian Dream administration's repressive NGO legislation has not affected them, though the government has targeted pro-Western civil society groups. Leaders of these pro-Iran organizations, such as those from the Imam Ali Charitable Foundation, deny that they receive funding from Tehran. However, they publicly venerate Iranian political leaders, including by displaying portraits of Ayatollah Khamenei, and their social media accounts disseminate political content sympathetic to the regime. This behavior points to a different possibility.

One such charity, the Imam Ali Foundation, live-streamed a sermon by Haji Hajiev, imam of the Imam Ali Mosque in Marneuli, with the Iranian ambassador to Georgia in attendance (see image 32). He condemned "the unjust attack by the oppressive, occupying, and law-breaking Zionist regime on the Islamic Republic of Iran" and declared solidarity with "the defensive front and with Sayyid Ali Khamenei."<sup>78</sup>

While direct financial proof connecting Iran to these charities in Georgia remains elusive, Tehran appears to be following a similar pattern. It weaponizes charitable fronts to import funds and export its ideology (for more on Iranian efforts to smuggle cash into Georgia to fund its operations, see box 2). Georgian-based en-

Table 1. Iran-Linked Charities in Georgia



**Imam Ali Charity Foundation** was registered in 2013, and in April 2024, a new entity called Imam Ali Fund was registered at the same address. The fund’s Facebook page, which has more than one thousand followers, regularly posts updates about weekly prayers held at the Imam Ali Mosque as well as political content aligned with the Iranian government.<sup>79</sup>



**The Fund for Assistance to Needy Children Deprived of Parental Care** (also known as **Charity Fund Amin**) was established on March 15, 2020. Notably, several posts on the foundation’s Facebook page express gratitude to the embassy of Iran in Georgia for providing supplies to families in need. At least three such posts were identified, each displaying provisions marked with Iranian flags.<sup>80</sup>



**Zehra Ana Foundation** supports vulnerable individuals, not only in Georgia but also abroad, sending humanitarian provisions to communities in need across African and Asian countries.<sup>81</sup> Although the establishment date is unclear, the fund’s communication suggests operations started in 2020.



**Relief Fund Qovsar** is affiliated with Al-Mustafa International University.<sup>82</sup>

Source: Authors’ research.

titles likely serve analogous purposes. Denials notwithstanding, symbolic and rhetorical alignment with Tehran is unambiguous.

Later in a 2020 operation, Georgia’s security service uncovered a so-called Hawala, an informal, trust-based money transfer system that moves funds outside the formal banking sector. Iran and its network often uses this system to move cash and evade international sanctions. The Georgian authorities detained two unidentified Iranian nationals, seizing \$155,897, €8,730 (approximately \$9,450), and €66,673 (approximately \$24,500), while estimating the Hawala’s total turnover at over €12 million (approximately \$4.6 million).<sup>87</sup>

### Pro-Iran Media Network

In the last 10 years, a pro-Iranian media ecosystem has emerged and now systematically injects Tehran’s narratives into Georgia’s ethnic Azerbaijani population. These outlets operate

primarily through low-cost, high-reach alternative platforms like social media, niche news websites, and local cultural websites. Tehran uses these outlets for shaping public opinion, ideological indoctrination, cultivating and recruiting sympathizers, fundraising, and spreading propaganda that reinforces Iran’s soft power in the South Caucasus.

The first key outlet is 24news.ge (see image 33), which operates as a leading Azerbaijani-language platform in Georgia. Publicly, it purports to offer balanced news on a broad range of topics and is active on social media, including YouTube. In practice, however, it consistently privileges Iran-aligned narratives and frames Tehran-linked actors in a favorable light.

Its content routinely amplifies Iranian government statements, reposts articles from the regime-affiliated Mehr News Agency

### Box 2. The Disappearing Trail: Iranian Cash Flows and the Erosion of Enforcement in Georgia

Previously, Georgian authorities publicly intercepted and seized undeclared cash linked to Iranian nationals and networks. But no such cases have been reported in recent years. Meanwhile, Iran's institutional, religious, and economic footprint in Georgia has expanded markedly. Given Iran's reliance on opaque, cash-based financial channels to project influence abroad,<sup>83</sup> the lack of recent enforcement does not suggest a decline in activity. Rather, when viewed alongside Georgia's broader political realignment and growing openness toward Tehran, it indicates that a permissive environment is allowing Iranian influence to deepen without meaningful scrutiny.

Many regional observers and analysts have argued that Iran is smuggling physical cash into Georgia, and according to them, passenger buses are a primary conduit for Iran to channel money to its Georgian influence network.<sup>84</sup> However, the clandestine nature of these operations renders definitive proof elusive. Documented incidents of undeclared cash seizures involving Iranian nationals are confined to earlier years. At the Vale border crossing in 2013, Georgian customs seized \$100,000 from an Iranian citizen who hid the money in a concealed compartment on a passenger bus. In separate incidents that year, customs officials at airports seized \$65,000 and \$255,000 from Iranians.<sup>85</sup> While these sums may not be staggering, they should be viewed in a larger context, and cash smuggling is only one way Iran funds its operations.

Iran's cash smuggling operations gained attention in October 2018 when then-US National Security Advisor John Bolton visited Tbilisi. While he was in the country, the State Security Service of Georgia conducted a major raid on a hawala network, during which an undisclosed amount of cash was seized.<sup>86</sup> Bolton was reportedly in Georgia in part to meet with senior government officials and warn them about Iranian infiltration. At that time, US-Georgia security cooperation was robust despite rising Russian influence and early signs of democratic backsliding. The EU-Georgia Association Agreement and Charter of Strategic Partnership were fully active, and the Georgian Dream government still heeded Washington's concerns. That level of responsiveness no longer exists.

(which spreads Tehran's propaganda), and offered sympathetic reporting on Ayatollah Khamenei's pronouncements. For example, when Iran conducted strikes on Mossad facilities in 2019, 24news.ge reported on Tehran's threats of a "crushing response" to external interference and on the regime's boasts about its nuclear program's resilience.<sup>88</sup> The outlet gives Karbala pilgrimages extensive and reverential treatment while reporting on the logistics and participants' testimonials. It frames the events in a spiritual lens that is similar to other Shia networks under Iranian influence.

The outlet was founded on January 22, 2018, under the non-commercial, non-entrepreneurial legal entity "Leader Media of Georgia," and launched the next month on February 21. Azer

Mamedov (no relation to Rasim Mamedov), the current akhund of Kirkli village mosque in Marneuli,<sup>89</sup> leads the outlet and is a registered religious official under the Administration of All Muslims of Georgia. His connection to the organization places it in Iran's orbit, even as it maintains a veneer of general-interest reporting.

The second key outlet is ahlibeyt.ge, whose domain name (registered on February 3, 2010) explicitly evokes the Ahl al-Bayt World Assembly. It is an Azerbaijani-language religious-cultural website headquartered in Marneuli, and is explicitly oriented toward the country's ethnic Azerbaijani minority. Ostensibly positioned as a repository of religious guidance and cultural heritage, the platform in practice functions as a conduit for Ira-

Image 33. 24news.ge Homepage



Note: The headline reads, "Ayatollah Khamenei told Trump: 'Do you think you have destroyed our nuclear industry?'"<sup>90</sup>

Source: ahlibeyt.ge.

nian-aligned—and intermittently pro-Russian—narratives that are consistently cloaked in Islamic rhetoric and moral framing.

A detailed report by the Digital Forensic Research Lab of the Atlantic Council and sustained monitoring reveal that ahlibeyt.ge systematically amplifies Tehran’s doctrinal messaging.<sup>91</sup> It routinely showcases addresses by Iranian supreme leaders and local clerics, cultivating an Iranian-inflected Shia identity while embedding the lexicon of “resistance.” A salient example is its publication of Ayatollah Khamenei’s eulogy upon the death of Hezbollah Secretary-General Nasrallah (see image 34). The outlet cast the event as martyrdom and underscored the imperative of perpetual struggle against Israel.<sup>92</sup>

Articles uniformly label Israel the “Zionist regime” and advocate the liberation of “occupied Quds (Jerusalem).”<sup>93</sup> Reports by ahlibeyt.ge on Quds Day observances and analogous events highlight Iran’s core ideological pillars: anti-Israel resistance, pan-Muslim unity, and principled opposition to Western and Israeli policies.

Image 34. Ahlybeyt.ge Reporting on Ayatollah Khamenei’s Statement on the Death of Hassan Nasrallah



Source: Screenshot of Ahlybeyt.ge on September 29, 2024.

Image 35. Anti-American and Pro-Iranian Images at the 2025 Tasua Procession in Marneuli



Note: A child carries a photograph of Ayatollah Khamenei as others display a sign depicting President Trump with bloody hands.

Source: Islamic Research Center of Georgia.<sup>96</sup>

The website has also offered a pro-Russia perspective. After Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, *ahlibeyt.ge* blamed the West for its culpability while adopting Kremlin terminology such as the so-called special military operation. It has also portrayed Vladimir Putin positively as a friend of Muslims, and has spread allegations that the US stole Syrian oil in 2019 and supported the Islamic State.<sup>94</sup>

A third key outlet, the Islamic Research Center of Georgia, is based in Marneuli and shares pro-Iranian content on its social

media account. Its Facebook page has 1,500 subscribers and regularly amplifies religion-focused content, often with political connotation in line with the Islamic Republic's foreign policy agenda (see image 35).<sup>95</sup>

### Iranian Economic Expansion into Georgia

Iran's expanding business activity in Georgia has been a visible manifestation of its growing presence in the country. In July 2025, the Georgian NGO Civic IDEA (Civic Initiative for Democratic and Euro-Atlantic Choice) published an investigation accusing the Georgian Dream government of enabling Iranian businesses—including some connected to Iran's armed forces—to use Georgia as a "strategic transit hub" for evading international sanctions and channeling funds back to Tehran.<sup>97</sup>

The Civic IDEA report details how Persian-language websites have urged entrepreneurs to establish firms in Georgia to simplify exports and capitalize on Tbilisi's trade pacts, such as with the European Union. In some instances, Iran encourages businesses to relabel products as Georgian to enable duty-free transit.<sup>98</sup> The report also references official data showing that approximately 9,300 enterprises connected to Iranian nationals were founded between 2013 and 2024, including 382 in 2024 alone.

Another report by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Georgian Service in 2025 found that more than 12,800 Iranian businesses were registered in Georgia. These registrations have surged twice: once in 2012 when Georgian Dream came to power and again in 2019 when Western countries placed tough sanctions on Iran.<sup>99</sup> Many of these companies are inactive. According to the National Statistics Office of Georgia, in 2025 only 624 Iranian-owned companies were active in Georgia, but companies listed as inactive can still help Iran bypass regulators' radar, especially if Tbilisi is welcoming Iran's presence. At the same time, most of these entities are registered as small businesses. Because there are so many small and inactive Iranian-owned businesses in Georgia, most of the funds supporting Iranian

influence infrastructure are likely entering the country through other means that are more difficult to track. For example, Georgian citizens may be setting up entities to serve Iranian interests.

The evidence shows a consistent pattern: there is a mass of Iranian registrations routed through a small set of addresses with minimal public contact infrastructure and many one-off managers. But there are questions about whether these are primarily active firms or mostly nominal entities parked at customs clearance service hubs and cargo terminals. The 2016–22 surge can be explained by a combination of facilitative registration services, Georgia’s market access, and the incentives described in the Civic IDEA report, alongside broader shifts in Iran-Georgia ties and sanctions avoidance.

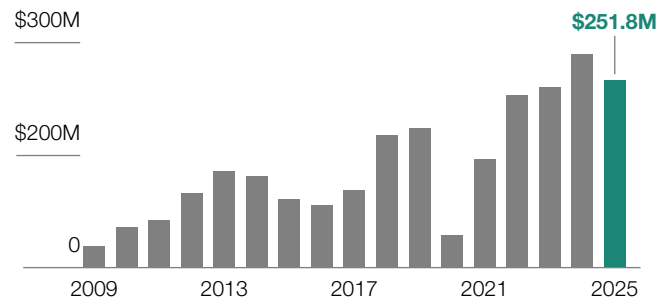
The statistics support a dual reality. There is genuine business activity, especially in trade, and there is also a large number of registrations whose scale, address clustering, and contact patterns raise reasonable questions about the operational substance and use of Georgian entities for rerouting goods and payments.

### Import of Iranian Products into Georgia

Since 2022, the availability of consumer goods coming from Iran has markedly increased in grocery stores and small retail outlets across the Kvemo Kartli region, particularly in the municipalities of Marneuli, Bolnisi, Dmanisi, and Gardabani. Iranian exports to Georgia have risen steadily since 2018, when the total value stood at \$176.6 million (the only interruption occurred in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic). From 2022 onward, Georgia’s annual imports first exceeded \$200 million and reached a record \$285.1 million in 2024 (see figure 1). In 2025, imports remained exceptionally high at \$251.8 million, confirming that elevated trade levels have persisted beyond the 2022–24 surge.<sup>100</sup>

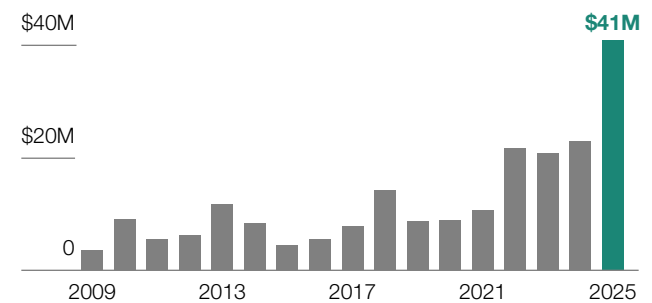
The sharpest growth occurred in the food and beverage category: in 2022, imports in this segment more than doubled year-on-year, rising 106 percent to \$21.8 million. After that jump, imports remained elevated, totaling \$20.9 million in 2023 and

Figure 1. Georgian Imports from Iran



Source: “საგარეო ვაჭრობის პორტალი” [External Trade Portal], National Statistics Office of Georgia, accessed February 13, 2026, <https://ex-trade.geostat.ge>.

Figure 2. Georgian Imports of Iranian Food and Beverages



Source: “External Trade Portal,” National Statistics Office of Georgia.

increasing to \$23.0 million in 2024. In 2025, imports climbed sharply again to a new high of \$41.0 million (see figure 2). Overall, food and beverage imports from Iran have shown exceptional growth since 2022, with 2025 marking the historic peak. Current trends strongly suggest that this expansion will continue at a similar pace in the coming years, and Iran could easily use this trade to help fund its influence network.

### The Way Ahead: Policy Recommendations

Iran’s growing influence in Georgia should alarm Western policymakers. As Georgian Dream becomes more isolated and

disconnected from Georgia's natural partners in the West, adversaries like Russia, Iran, and China will find new opportunities to develop economic and political ties with Tbilisi. And as Iran faces pressure in its traditional areas of influence (i.e., in the Gulf and Syria, and through its Hezbollah and the Houthi proxies), it will look for easy wins to advance its ideological and theological revolution elsewhere. So Western policymakers need to watch events in Georgia closely and develop sound policies that can mitigate the worst outcomes.

To counteract Tehran's growing influence in Georgia, the United States, in conjunction with its European partners, should first put maximum pressure on Iran. The Islamic Republic faces mounting national unrest, and the regime cannot focus as much on spreading its malign influence abroad when internal matters are distracting it. Therefore, the US and its allies should increase their economic, diplomatic, and political pressure on the Islamic Republic, while at the same time emboldening Iranians to protest.

Second, the United States ought to recognize that the Islamic Republic's growing foothold in Georgia—particularly among its ethnic Azerbaijani minority—poses a long-term source of regional instability, including for neighboring Azerbaijan. Washington should also accept the hard reality that Georgia is no longer aligned with American interests and is no longer a reliable partner. The current government in Tbilisi has actively cooperated with a US adversary, taking steps that strengthen Iran's position in a strategically important region.

Similar to other cases, such as in Venezuela, Georgia's embrace of Iranian influence has coincided with democratic backsliding and a campaign to crush democratic forces, including civil society. Still, the country's civil society continues to protest routinely against the Georgian Dream government's increasingly authoritarian rule. So the United States' third step should be to pursue policies that enable the voices of legitimate political opposition groups in Georgia to be heard. Meanwhile, Washington should not be afraid to use economic and political tools, such as travel bans and sanctions, against Georgian Dream officials who cozy up to the Islamic Republic. The United States should make it clear to the Georgian government that a reset of relations is only possible if its trajectory reverses. This change would include releasing political prisoners, restoring civil liberties, and improving the electoral process. Otherwise, Washington should make clear it will view Georgia as being closely aligned with a US adversary.

Finally, the US cannot ignore Iran's role in the broader South Caucasus. Traditionally, Washington has viewed the Iranian challenge through the lens of Middle East policy, but this is too simplistic. US European Command and Central Command need to work together to counter the growing Iranian threat across the entire region. For example, Iranian influence in the South Caucasus threatens to undermine the recent peace initiatives between Armenia and Azerbaijan. And as Iran and Russia move closer together in ways that threaten Europe, Georgia is helping facilitate this relationship.



# ABBREVIATIONS

**ABWA:** Ahl al-Bayt World Assembly

**AMIU:** Al-Mustafa International University

**Civic IDEA:** Civic Initiative for Democratic and Euro-Atlantic Choice

**GMJU:** Georgian Muslim Youth Union

**IRGC:** Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps

**IRGC-QF:** Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force

**UGSQ:** Union of Georgian Students in Qom, Iran



# ENDNOTES

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