

# South Caucasus Meets the Middle East

In recent years, the geopolitics of the Middle East, the South Caucasus, the Black Sea, and Central Asia have become increasingly intertwined, characterized by overlapping security dynamics, shifting alignments, diverse regime types, and broader geopolitical shifts. Conflicts such as the Gaza War, the Iran-Israel confrontation, and Israeli strikes on Syria have reinforced this trend, turning the South Caucasus and the Middle East into an increasingly interconnected regional security complex.

***The South Caucasus and the Middle East are increasingly forming a single, bi-regional security complex.***

According to Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, a regional security complex is shaped by patterns of amity and enmity in which states' actions directly impact others within the same region. Security threats and opportunities are interdependent, making it impossible to treat any state's concerns in isolation. This paper argues that the South Caucasus and the Middle East are increasingly forming a single, bi-regional security complex.

Two key drivers underpin this development: the erosion of Russia's dominance in the Caucasus, paralleled by a waning Western influence, and the rise of regional middle powers that operate across both regions, filling the vacuum and reshaping the competitive and cooperative landscape.



**NATALIE SABANADZE**  
Contributor

Ambassador Natalie Sabanadze has been a Cyrus Vance Visiting Professor in International Relations at Mount Holyoke College between 2021–23. Prior to this, she served as head of the Georgian mission to the EU and ambassador plenipotentiary to the Kingdom of Belgium and Grand Duchy of Luxembourg since 2013. From 2005–13, she worked as a senior official at the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities in The Hague, where she held several positions including head of Central and South East Europe section and later, head of the Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia section. She holds an MSc in International Relations from London School of Economics and D.Phil in Politics and International Relations from Oxford University. Natalie Sabanadze has published and lectured extensively on post-communist transition, nationalism and ethnic conflict, Russian foreign policy, and the EU in the world.



**GALIP DALAY**  
Guest Contributor

Galip Dalay is a senior consulting fellow at Chatham House, a doctoral researcher and coordinator of the Contemporary Türkiye Programme at St Antony's College, University of Oxford, and a non-resident senior fellow at the Middle East Council on Global Affairs. He is also a Mercator-IPC senior fellow at the Istanbul Policy Centre. Previously, he held fellowships at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), the Robert Bosch Academy, the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM) in Vienna, and the Brookings Doha Center. His research focuses on Türkiye, the Middle East, the Black Sea, Russian foreign policy, and Türkiye's relations with the West and Russia. His work has been published in Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy, CNN, Le Monde, and other international outlets.



## South Caucasus: From ‘Near Abroad’ to the Near East

The post-Cold War regional order in the South Caucasus, which held until the war in Ukraine, was shaped by Russian dominance and its rivalry with the West. Moscow viewed the South Caucasus as part of its “near abroad”—a traditional sphere of influence—and pursued a two-pronged strategy: cultivating levers of influence over Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, often by manipulating ethnic conflicts and countering perceived Western encroachment, notably the EU’s Eastern Partnership and Georgia’s NATO and EU ambitions.

In response, the South Caucasus states developed diverging foreign and security policies. Georgia sought protection through integration with the West; Armenia relied on Russia for security against Azerbaijan and Türkiye, while Azerbaijan remained non-aligned, deepening its ties with Türkiye. These trajectories produced two broad regional alignments: a Russia-Armenia-Iran axis favoring the status quo and a more West-leaning Azerbaijan-Georgia-Türkiye axis, with Georgia at the forefront of Euro-Atlantic integration, backed by Ankara.

Russia’s prolonged war of aggression against Ukraine has stretched its strategic bandwidth, prompting a reassessment of priorities and a recalibration of its relations with regional actors such as Türkiye and Iran. Moscow has come to rely on Iran for military support and on Türkiye’s [balancing act](#) between the West and Russia, shifting the balance of power in these bilateral relationships. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan’s victory in Nagorno-Karabakh has further solidified the Azerbaijan-Türkiye axis as a credible counterweight to Russia’s previously uncontested regional dominance. Russia’s main gain in the region has been Georgia’s move away from its traditional pro-Western foreign policy, with Tbilisi joining Moscow in pushing back

against the West and its democracy promotion agenda.

***The EU’s inability to halt Georgia’s geopolitical U-turn and democratic backsliding, despite granting it candidate status, is a sign of its waning leverage and declining regional influence.***

The EU’s inability to halt Georgia’s geopolitical U-turn and democratic backsliding, despite granting it candidate status, is a sign of its waning leverage and declining regional influence. Moreover, the EU’s Eastern Partnership, once encompassing all three South Caucasus states, has largely lost momentum. Only Armenia is [actively seeking](#) closer ties with the West as part of a strategy to diversify its foreign and security partnerships. However, Yerevan seeks not to replace its dependence on Russia but to build a network of balancing relationships to regain autonomy. With Georgia turning away from the West, Armenia’s room for maneuver is increasingly constrained.

As a result of these shifts, the previously bifurcated regional order—mainly defined by the rivalry between Russia and the West—is giving way to a more fragmented landscape marked by overlapping patterns of competition and cooperation. The growing influence of Türkiye, rising tensions between Iran and Azerbaijan, and deepening ties between Azerbaijan and Israel are key developments that increasingly bind the South Caucasus to the Middle East. The recent escalation of the Iran-Israel conflict [reverberated](#) in both Baku and Yerevan, albeit in different ways, highlighting how developments in the Middle East affect states in the South Caucasus.

In bilateral and trilateral relations among Moscow, Ankara, and Tehran, the Middle East and the South Caucasus now function less as distinct regions and more as a single strategic space. Disputes and co-

operation in one area often spill over into the other. During and after the Nagorno-Karabakh war, for instance, Türkiye and Russia explored the idea of a structured engagement framework—mirroring their earlier coordination in Syria via the Astana and Sochi formats with Iran—although without success.

The emergence of [the 3+3 format](#)—bringing together Russia, Türkiye, Iran, and the three South Caucasus states—reflects a trend toward regionalized multilateralism that blurs the boundary between the two regions. Georgia remains the only country to officially decline participation, citing Russia’s involvement and [U.S. opposition](#), which views the initiative as sidelining Western influence. However, given Georgia’s recent foreign policy shift and growing antagonism towards the U.S. and the EU, its participation in the 3+3 format can [no longer be ruled out](#), less for strategic gain than to counter the perception of diplomatic isolation surrounding the Georgian Dream government.

## Emerging Bi-Regional Security Complex

One of the defining characteristics of a regional security complex is its tendency to securitize issues that traditionally fall outside the realm of hard security. In both the South Caucasus and the Middle East, one such issue is the presence of cross-border ethnic minorities, which creates what Rogers Brubaker terms a [“triadic nexus”](#) involving the minority community, the state of residence, and a kin-state.

The complex and securitized dynamics of sectarian and ethnic relations continue to define the geopolitical landscape of both regions. These dynamics foster mutual suspicion, territorial claims, and enduring insecurity. Mistrust in the political and identity aspirations of domestic minorities often extends to suspicion of neighboring states’

geopolitical ambitions. In this context, the “triadic nexus”—linking a minority, the state in which it resides, and a kin-state—shapes not only state-society relations and questions of national identity but also alignment patterns, regional priorities, and engagement with external actors. As a result, domestic political order is intimately tied to regional order, just as national identity becomes inseparable from a state’s geopolitical positioning.

Iran’s strained relationship with Azerbaijan stems in part from concerns over irredentism linked to its sizable Azerbaijani population in the north, despite their general integration and low risk of separatism. Tehran remains wary of rising Azerbaijani-Turkish influence in the Caucasus, in part due to their shared linguistic and identity ties. In turn, Armenia has sought to align with Russia and Iran to counterbalance the perceived threat from Azerbaijan and Türkiye. Both Moscow and Tehran oppose Ankara and Baku’s “Turkic world” narrative, which they see as undermining their regional roles. The recent Iran-Israel escalation has further intensified Tehran’s fears—not only of regime change but of potential fragmentation along sectarian and ethnic lines.

***Since Russia invaded Ukraine, a new wave of Russian migrants has settled in Armenia, Georgia, and Türkiye. While Moscow has not yet sought to instrumentalize this diaspora, concerns remain given its history of using Russian communities abroad to pressure smaller states.***

Tensions between states and minority groups have long shaped conflict in the region, with unresolved disputes such as Abkhazia, the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, and, until recently, Armenia-Azerbaijan continuing to influence regional geopolitics. The presence of Armenian and Georgian com-



munities in Türkiye adds further complexity to an already intricate ethno-political landscape. Since Russia invaded Ukraine, a new wave of Russian migrants has settled in Armenia, Georgia, and Türkiye. While Moscow has not yet sought to instrumentalize this diaspora, concerns remain given its history of using Russian communities abroad to pressure smaller states.

In Georgia, both Azerbaijani and Armenian minorities remain poorly integrated with limited proficiency in the state language, making them vulnerable to political influence from their respective kin states—and Russia. In this context, bilateral tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan risk spilling over into Georgia, where their kin minorities reside. Tbilisi has long feared that deteriorating relations between Yerevan and Baku could reverberate domestically, potentially drawing Georgian citizens of Armenian and Azerbaijani descent into broader regional disputes.

Ethno-sectarian tensions often resurface during periods of state fragility, driving pressures for fragmentation. In Iran, potential instability raises the prospect of refugee flows into Türkiye and Azerbaijan, sparking contentious debates around national and religious identity and fueling fears of state collapse. Such a scenario could have destabilizing effects not only on the Middle East and the South Caucasus but also beyond. If Israel continues its efforts to destabilize Iran by exploiting ethnic and sectarian divides, the reverberations are likely to be felt across both regions. In these conditions, the boundary between soft and hard security blurs, with identity questions increasingly framed as national security concerns. This dynamic erodes prospects for regionalism and prevents the formation of a coherent regional order. As distinctions between high and low politics vanish, even cooperation on technical or functional matters becomes hostage to unresolved strategic disputes. Consequently, both regions remain de-

finied by fragmentation, overlapping alliances, and multi-layered rivalries.

## Geopolitics of (Inter) Regional Connectivity

Another increasingly securitized area linking the South Caucasus and the Middle East is connectivity. Competing regional actors back rival infrastructure projects, transforming connectivity from a potential driver of cooperation into a source of geopolitical competition. Nonetheless, efforts persist to identify mutually beneficial solutions that align with national security interests. Iran, for example, has promoted “[connectivity diplomacy](#)” to ease tensions with Azerbaijan and identify common ground. Meanwhile, Armenia has advanced its [Crossroads of Peace](#) initiative, seeking to overcome its isolation from major transit routes and to leverage its geographical position to promote sustainable peace through economic interdependence. Georgia has invested in enhancing its transit potential and developing [trilateral cooperation](#) with Azerbaijan and Türkiye, seeking not only financial benefits but also, and perhaps more importantly, utilizing it as a security guarantee.

***Normalization among Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Türkiye would weaken Russia’s regional leverage, especially over Armenia, its most vulnerable partner.***

The Iran-Israel conflict risks undermining the International North-South Transport Corridor, jointly backed by Russia and Iran as a counterweight to the Middle Corridor. If tensions spill over into Iraq—though this has not yet occurred significantly—it could also jeopardize the Iraq Development Road project. These setbacks would further enhance the strategic appeal of the Middle Corridor. Meanwhile, the ongoing rapprochement between Türkiye and Armenia, along with the thaw in

Armenia-Azerbaijan relations, creates a favorable climate for Armenia's inclusion in regional connectivity efforts. Normalization among Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Türkiye would weaken Russia's regional leverage, especially over Armenia, its most vulnerable partner. It would also reduce Georgia's strategic advantage as a sole transit route, previously enabled by Armenian-Azerbaijani hostility. This shift may prompt Georgia to move closer to Russia as the Georgian Dream government seeks new sources of revenue and diplomatic backing.

One of the most contested and securitized transit routes is the so-called Zangezur Corridor, which would link Azerbaijan to its Nakhchivan exclave through Armenian territory. The issue encapsulates the region's complex geopolitical landscape, touching on the competing security interests of multiple actors. Azerbaijan and Türkiye support the opening of the corridor while Armenia opposes it, fearing a loss of sovereignty and heightened security risks. Russia initially backed the proposal, hoping to deploy its border guards along the route to regain influence. However, Moscow has since accepted [Tehran's demarche](#) against the Zangezur project—at least temporarily—prioritizing its wartime partnership with Iran. Tehran is particularly [alarmed](#) by the corridor, viewing it as an attempt to expand Turkish influence in the region further and undermine its position in east-west transit. Tehran also fears that the proposed corridor will be used as a tool of containment by Türkiye and its Western allies. The recent U.S. proposal to resolve the dispute by outsourcing the corridor's management to a private American company was [viewed](#) in Tehran as part of Washington's broader Middle East strategy aimed at encircling and weakening Iran.

## Shifting Regional Alignments

The geopolitical order of the South Caucasus is increasingly shaped by the evolving interplay between Russia, Türkiye, and Iran, with develop-

ments in the Middle East influencing their positions and the regional balance of power. The fall of the Assad regime in Syria has boosted Türkiye's geopolitical weight, especially vis-à-vis Russia and Iran. Since the 7 October attacks, Iran's regional standing has weakened further due to its escalating confrontation with Israel and the reduction of its proxy network. This has directly impacted Armenia, which has long relied on Iran to counterbalance Azerbaijan and resist the Zangezur Corridor project. In response, Yerevan has actively pursued normalization with Türkiye while cautiously re-engaging with Russia, as evident in Prime Minister Pashinyan's historic [visit](#) to Istanbul and the resumption of [dialogue](#) between the Armenian and Russian foreign ministers.

***As Iran's influence wanes, the rivalry between Türkiye and Russia is likely to intensify with both seeking to fill the emerging power vacuum.***

As Iran's influence wanes, the rivalry between Türkiye and Russia is likely to intensify with both seeking to fill the emerging power vacuum. Meanwhile, Türkiye's growing geopolitical alignment with the West is expected to deepen Russian suspicions about Ankara's ambitions, prompting Türkiye to accelerate its normalization with Armenia as part of a broader strategy to consolidate its influence across the South Caucasus by cultivating ties with all three regional states.

Middle Eastern conflicts have also reshaped alignment patterns in the South Caucasus. Iran was likely frustrated by [the limited support](#) it received from Russia during its 12-day war with Israel—an experience that may strain their bilateral ties. In contrast, Israel's partnership with Azerbaijan has deepened since 7 October, while Türkiye-Azerbaijan relations remain strong despite divergent views on Israel and Gaza. These dynamics have intensified Iran-Azerbaijan tensions, and if Tür-

kiye-Armenia and Armenia-Azerbaijan normalization continue, Iran's regional alignment strategy would suffer further setbacks. Although mutual dependencies may sustain a *modus vivendi* between Moscow and Tehran, as well as between Tehran and Yerevan, these relationships are increasingly defined by mutual distrust. The deepening Israel-Azerbaijan partnership also poses long-term challenges for Iran, extending beyond security into domestic politics and identity, given the emotional and cultural resonance between Azerbaijan and Iran's significant Azeri minority.

Despite its deep-rooted suspicion of the Baku-Tel Aviv axis, Tehran is likely to seek improved ties with Azerbaijan and redefine its role in the South Caucasus. This would not mark a shift in Iran's traditional strategic goals but rather a pragmatic recalibration aimed at managing tensions and reclaiming influence in light of recent setbacks, including the weakening of its proxy network, Assad's downfall, its direct conflict with Israel, and its diminished regional role. These developments may prompt Iran to adopt a new neighborhood policy aimed at restoring its relevance and bolstering regional stability.

Following the restoration of its territorial integrity, Baku feels emboldened and ascendant, seeking a greater role across both the South Caucasus and the Middle East. Reflecting its deepening ties with Israel, Azerbaijan has positioned itself as a diplomatic hub between Tel Aviv and regional actors. Amid heightened tensions between Türkiye and Israel, Baku [hosted](#) officials from both countries who agreed on a deconfliction mechanism in Syria, now a zone of growing geopolitical rivalry between Ankara and Tel Aviv. Additionally, Baku [hosted](#) Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa and reportedly facilitated meetings between his delegation and Israeli officials. Azerbaijan is thus serving as a platform for Middle Eastern diplomacy, while the reverse is also taking place: the UAE recently hosted Azerbaijani President Aliyev and Arme-

nian Prime Minister Pashinyan, underscoring the growing interconnection between the two regions across security, diplomacy, energy, and economic affairs.

## Fragmented and Multi-Layered

The merging of the South Caucasus and the Middle East into a single regional security complex signals the emergence of a new geopolitical architecture—fluid, multi-layered, and defined by overlapping spheres of influence rather than binary alignments. As traditional power hierarchies erode, regional middle powers like Türkiye, Iran, and increasingly Azerbaijan are filling the void, reshaping patterns of diplomacy, conflict, and cooperation. The [decline of Russian hegemony](#), the West's faltering leverage, and Iran's growing vulnerabilities have opened space for new actors and alignments but have also raised the stakes of regional competition.

***The deepening ties between Middle Eastern and South Caucasian actors are giving rise to a dense web of competition in which alliances are volatile, risks are compounded, and domestic instability easily reverberates across borders.***

This convergence is not producing a stable order but rather a fragmented and multi-layered security environment where hard and soft threats intersect, where identity politics shape grand strategy, and where connectivity itself is increasingly securitized. The deepening ties between Middle Eastern and South Caucasian actors are giving rise to a dense web of competition in which alliances are volatile, risks are compounded, and domestic instability easily reverberates across borders. Understanding this emerging bi-regional security architecture is crucial not only for local actors but also for Western powers seeking to engage with or contain its consequences ■