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# Israel plays a covert role in Georgia

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Last month's five-day war in Georgia, a tiny neighbour of Russia and Turkey, rekindled memories of the beautiful American ballad, Georgia on My Mind, which was written in 1930 and became a famous hit only in 1960 when the popular American blind singer, Ray Charles, introduced it nationwide.

The lyrics were written by Stuart Gorrell for Georgia Carmichael, sister of the musician, Hoagy Carmichael, but the lyrics of the song are ambiguous enough to be referring to the American state of Georgia or the woman. On March 7, 1979, in a mutual symbol of reconciliation after conflict over civil rights issues, Charles performed it before the Georgia General Assembly and, a month later, the assembly adopted it as the state's song.

Now, whether this continuing Caucasian conflict, recklessly provoked by its pro-Western president, Mikhail Saakashvili, and which was about to precipitate a serious confrontation between the US, supported by European nations, and Russia and its allies will have a similar ending remains to be seen. Thanks to the efforts of French President Nicolas Sarkozy, at present head of the European Union, an important first step has been taken. Russia agreed to withdraw its troops from the war-battered region of Georgia but not the two breakaway territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which have enjoyed de facto autonomous status for more than 10 years.

What has been particularly intriguing about the conflict has been the behind-the-scenes role played by Israel which has enjoyed a strong footing in Georgia where many senior officials, including the Georgian defence minister, are Israeli by nationality or Jewish. In fact, many Georgians have in the past settled in Israel and some of them are involved in the prosperous defence industry there.

## Conflict

The conflict in Georgia is also over a major Caspian pipeline that delivers oil from Azerbaijan, passing through Georgia and ending in the Turkish port of Ceyhan on the Mediterranean. Israel is reportedly expecting to receive oil and gas from the pipeline, although Russia and others have been hoping to be recipients as well.

Saakashvili was reportedly counting on Randy Scheunemann, who is Senator John McCain's adviser on foreign policy, for full American support, writes David Bromwich in The Huffington Post. "Scheunemann was the agent of Ahmad Chalabi in agitating for the war against Iraq ... (and) closely linked ... with the American Enterprise Institute, the Office of the Vice President, the Weekly Standard: the most drastic and persistent lobbying network for the Iraq war, and the group that lately pressed the hardest for a war with Iran."

Gideon Levy of Haaretz has also elaborated on his country's implication in the Georgia debacle. "Israel might pay a heavy price for the drones and training by Israel Ziv and Gal Hirsch, our new mercenaries in Georgia," he writes, maintaining that both are linked now by Israel's decision to supply arms and training to the project of 'reintegrating' Georgia's pro-Russian sectors which Bromwich describes as "another white-washed term for occupation".

Israel stance vis-a-vis Iran has also taken a new aggressive tone this week.

Israel's Minister for Pensioners' Affairs Rafi Eitan, a former top Mossad agent who masterminded the kidnapping of Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi official, from Argentina in 1960, told a German magazine, Der Spiegel, that Israel may abduct Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Unperturbed, he confirmed that Israel would like to bring him before the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

The Israeli minister's remark followed a meeting between Vice President Dick Cheney and Israeli President Shimon Peres during an economic conference held across from Italy's Lake Como.

Cheney told Peres then that Russia is selling arms to Syria and Iran with the clear knowledge that they are being channelled to Hezbollah and "terror groups in Iraq". Cheney's surprise statement came days after Sarkozy was in Damascus advocating Syrian-Israeli peace talks. The vice president's tidbit was probably in response to the assurance Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin gave to Peres in Beijing that he was not "indifferent to Israel's concerns over a nuclear-armed Iran", stressing that "there should be no doubt that Russia does not want a nuclear Iran".

Topping all these inflammatory US actions and remarks, coming in the last months of the Bush administration, was an announcement by US Secretary Condoleezza Rice of an "economic support package which will total at least one billion dollars to meet Georgia's pressing humanitarian needs and to facilitate its economic reconstruction."

One would have hoped that the Bush administration would have been more rational and extended part of this sizeable aid package to Iraqi refugees in Jordan and Syria who are facing deplorable conditions, compelling some impoverished young Iraqi women to turn to prostitution in order to support their families, or the American families who facing miserable times because of the economic crisis that has befallen America.

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