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# Israel of the Caucasus

By Arnaud de Borchgrave

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WASHINGTON, Sept. 2 (UPI) -- NATO guarantees that an attack against one member country is an attack against all are no longer what they used to be. Had Georgia been inside NATO, a number of European countries would no longer be willing to consider it an attack against their own soil.

For Russia, the geopolitical stars were in perfect alignment. The United States was badly overstretched and had no plausible way to talk tough without coming across as empty rhetoric. American resources have been drained by the Iraq and Afghan wars, and the war on terror. As Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov put it, Washington must now choose between its "pet project" Georgia and a partnership with Moscow.

Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili evidently thought the United States would come to his side militarily if Russian troops pushed him back into Georgia after ordering an attack last Aug. 8 on the breakaway province of South Ossetia. And when his forces were mauled by Russia's counterattack, bitter disappointment turned to anger. Along with Abkhazia, Georgia lost two provinces.

Georgia also had a special relationship with Israel that was mostly under the radar. Georgian Defense Minister Davit Kezerashvili is a former Israeli who moved things along by facilitating Israeli arms sales with U.S. aid. "We are now in a fight against the great Russia," he was quoted as saying, "and our hope is to receive assistance from the White House because Georgia cannot survive on its own."

The Jerusalem Post on Aug. 12 reported, "Georgian Prime Minister Vladimir Gurgenedze made a special call to Israel Tuesday morning to receive a blessing from one of the Haredi community's most important rabbis and spiritual leaders, Rabbi Aaron Leib Steinman. 'I want him to pray for us and our state,'" he was quoted.

Israel began selling arms to Georgia seven years ago. U.S. grants facilitated these purchases. From Israel came former minister and former Tel Aviv Mayor Roni Milo, representing Elbit Systems, and his brother Shlomo, former director general of Military Industries. Israeli UAV spy drones, made by Elbit Maarahot Systems, conducted recon flights over southern Russia, as well as into nearby Iran.

In a secret agreement between Israel and Georgia, two military airfields in southern Georgia had been earmarked for the use of Israeli fighter-bombers in the event of pre-emptive attacks against Iranian nuclear installations. This would sharply reduce the distance Israeli fighter-bombers would have to fly to hit targets in Iran. And to reach Georgian airstrips, the Israeli air force would fly over Turkey.

The attack ordered by Saakashvili against South Ossetia the night of Aug. 7 provided the Russians the pretext for Moscow to order Special Forces to raid these Israeli facilities where some Israeli drones were reported captured.

At a Moscow news conference, Gen. Anatoly Nogovitsyn, Russia's deputy chief of staff, said the extent of Israeli aid to Georgia included "eight types of military vehicles, explosives, landmines and special explosives for clearing minefields." Estimated numbers of Israeli trainers attached to the Georgian army range from 100 to 1,000. There were also 110 U.S. military personnel

on training assignments in Georgia. Last July 2,000 U.S. troops were flown in for "Immediate Response 2008," a joint exercise with Georgian forces.

Details of Israel's involvement were largely ignored by Israeli media lest they be interpreted as another blow to Israel's legendary military prowess, which took a bad hit in the Lebanese war against Hezbollah two years ago. Georgia's top diplomat in Tel Aviv complained about Israel's "lackluster" response to his country's military predicament and called for "diplomatic pressure on Moscow." According to the Jerusalem Post, the Georgian was told "the address for that type of pressure is Washington."

Haaretz reported Georgian Minister Temur Yakobashvili -- who is Jewish, the newspaper said -- told Israeli army radio that "Israel should be proud of its military which trained Georgian soldiers" because he explained rather implausibly, "a small group of our soldiers were able to wipe out an entire Russian military division, thanks to Israeli training."

The Tel Aviv-Tbilisi military axis was agreed at the highest levels with the approval of the Bush administration. The official liaison between the two entities was Reserve Brig. Gen. Gal Hirsch who commanded Israeli forces on the Lebanese border in July 2006. He resigned from the army after the Winograd Commission flayed Israel's conduct of its Second Lebanon War. Hirsch was also blamed for the seizure of two Israeli soldiers by Hezbollah.

Israeli personnel, working for "private" companies with close ties to the Israel Defense Forces, also trained Georgian soldiers in house-to-house fighting.

That Russia assessed these Israeli training missions as U.S.-approved is a given. The United States was also handicapped by a shortage of spy-in-the-sky satellite capability, already overextended by the Iraq and Afghan wars. Neither U.S. nor Georgian intelligence knew Russian forces were ready with an immediate and massive response to the Georgian attack Moscow knew was coming. Russian double agents ostensibly working for Georgia most probably egged on the military fantasies of the impetuous Saakashvili's "surprise attack" plans.

Saakashvili was convinced that by sending 2,000 of his soldiers to serve in Iraq (who were immediately flown home by the United States when Russia launched a massive counterattack into Georgia), he would be rewarded for his loyalty. He could not believe President Bush, a personal friend, would leave him in the lurch. Georgia, as Saakashvili saw his country's role, was the "Israel of the Caucasus."

The Tel Aviv-Tbilisi military axis appears to have been cemented at the highest levels, according to YNet, the Israeli electronic daily. But whether the IAF can still count on those air bases to launch bombing missions against Iran's nuke facilities is now in doubt.

Iran comes out ahead in the wake of the Georgian crisis. Neither Russia nor China is willing to respond to a Western request for more and tougher sanctions against the mullahs. Iran's European trading partners are also loath to squeeze Iran. The Russian-built, 1,000-megawatt Iranian reactor in Bushehr is scheduled to go online early next year.

A combination of Putin and oil has put Russia back on the geopolitical map of the world. Moscow's oil and gas revenue this year is projected at \$201 billion -- a 13-fold increase since Putin succeeded Boris Yeltsin eight years ago. Not shabby for a wannabe superpower on the comeback trail.

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