
Georgias Israeli arms point Russia to Iran

By Peter Hirschberg
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JERUSALEM - With the eruption of fighting between Russia and Georgia, Israel has found itself in an awkward position as a result of its arms sales to Georgia. Israel is now caught between its friendly relations with Georgia and its fear that the continued sale of weaponry will spark Russian retribution in the form of increased arms sales to Iran and Syria.

After fighting broke out late last week between Georgia and Russia over the breakaway provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Israel's Foreign Ministry over the weekend recommended suspending the sale of all weapons and defense-related equipment to Georgia, the daily Ha'aretz newspaper reported.

The paper quoted an unnamed senior official saying that Israel needed "to be very careful and sensitive these days. The Russians are selling many arms to Iran and Syria and there is no need to offer them an excuse to sell even more advanced weapons."

Israel's immediate concern is that Russia will proceed with the sale of the S-300 anti-aircraft missile system to Iran, which would help it defend its nuclear installations from aerial attack. Israel, like the US, believes that Iran's nuclear program is aimed at developing a bomb, and Israeli leaders have refused to rule out the possibility of a pre-emptive strike aimed at derailing Iran's nuclear aspirations.

Israel recently conducted a major aerial exercise over the eastern Mediterranean and Greece that was widely viewed as a rehearsal for a possible strike against Iran's nuclear installations. But with the US and Europe resorting to diplomatic pressure in the form of sanctions to deter Iran, Israel is loathe to anger Russia, which until now has opposed harsher sanctions on Tehran.

Israel's relations with Georgia have been close, partly because there is a large Georgian Jewish community in Israel. In recent years, ties have also taken on a military dimension, with military industries in Israel supplying Georgia with some US\$200 million worth of equipment since 2000. This has included remotely piloted planes, rockets, night-vision equipment, other electronic systems and training by former senior Israeli officers.

"Israel should be proud of its military, which trained Georgian soldiers," Georgian Minister Temur Yakobashvili told Israel's Army Radio in Hebrew shortly after the fighting erupted.

Israel is not a major supplier of arms to Georgia, with the US and France supplying Tbilisi with most of its weaponry. But the arms transfers have attracted media attention partly because of the role played by some high-profile Israeli figures, including former Tel Aviv mayor Roni Milo, who conducted business in Georgia on behalf of Israel Military Industries.

According to media reports, Brigadier General Gal Hirsch, a senior commander in the 2006 Lebanon war who resigned after the release of a highly critical report on the way the war was conducted, served as an adviser to Georgian security forces.

Further attention was drawn to the Israel-Georgia arms trade earlier this year when a Russian jet shot down an Israeli-made drone being operated by the Georgians.

Even though weapons transfers were modest in scope, Russian diplomats began increasingly relaying to Israel their annoyance over its military aid to Georgia, including the special forces training provided by security experts.

Israel decided about a year ago to limit military exports to defensive equipment and training.

New contracts weren't approved as the arms sales were scaled back. Georgia's request for 200 advanced Israeli-made Merkava tanks, for example, was turned down.

There were reports in Israel that the sale of the tanks didn't go through because of a disagreement over the commission that was to be paid as part of the deal. But Amos Yaron, the former director general of the Defense Ministry, insisted it had to do with "security-diplomatic considerations" - a clear reference to the sensitivity of the arms sales to Georgia. Israel, Yaron added, didn't want "to harm Russian interests too much".

Asked about the motivation to initially engage in the sale of weaponry to Georgia despite concerns it might anger Russia, Yaron replied: "We did see that there was potential for a conflagration in the region but Georgia is a friendly state, it's supported by the US, and so it was difficult to refuse."
