
Pipeline Politics : How Georgia Influences Israel and Iran

By Charles Ganske

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Since the August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia, many geopolitical analysts have tried to understand the origins of the conflict, and explain both U.S. support for the Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili and Russian support for his opponents, the separatist governments of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In doing so, geopolitical thinkers around the world have sought explanations for the conflict that go beyond the personalities of the individual leaders involved, such as the Russian President Dimitry Medvedev, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, and the Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili.

A New Great Game?

In seeking deeper underlying explanations for the sudden outbreak of war in the Caucasus, some analysts have pointed to an alleged "New Great Game" between Russia, China, the U.S., and European Union, all competing to acquire access to natural resources in the Caspian Sea and Central Asian regions of the former Soviet Union. These analysts claim that the U.S. became involved in supporting the Georgian government with foreign aid and diplomacy in the last several years primarily due to the construction of the Baku-Tblisi-Ceyhan (BKC) oil pipeline, which pumps oil from Azerbaijan overland through Georgia to the major Turkish port of Ceyhan on the Mediterranean Sea and circumvents Russian territory.

During the war, the Georgian government repeatedly alleged that Russia was trying to topple Saakashvili's government and attack the BKC pipeline in order to maintain a monopoly over the flow of oil and gas to the West from the former Soviet Union. The Russian government denied these allegations, pointing out (correctly) that there had been no structural damage to the pipeline whatsoever, and that its forces chose not to advance on Tblisi when Georgian Army resistance crumbled and the road to the capital was open. At any rate it, the BKC pipeline had been shut down by its operators for allegedly routine maintenance not long before the outbreak of hostilities on August 7.

The Prelude to War: Disregarded Warnings

Since coming to power in the 2003 "Rose Revolution" in Tblisi, the young and ambitious Columbia University-educated Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili had sought to cement his small country's energy ties with the West by bringing Georgia into the NATO military alliance. However, this was a step the Kremlin warned many times that it would not accept, having foreign troops and a military alliance on its southern border. The Russian government was further aggrieved in early 2008 by U.S. and NATO support for the independence of Kosovo, an ethnic Albanian-majority province that had once belonged to Serbia, Moscow's former "little brother" ally in the Balkans. Russia warned the U.S. that recognition of the de facto NATO protectorate of Kosovo within Serbia would trigger similar declarations of independence by the breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which were under Russian military peacekeeper protection.

What Exactly Was Saakashvili Thinking?

There is some reason to believe, based on internal discussions leaked by Erosi Kitsmarishvili, a former Georgian ambassador to Moscow who was later sacked by the Georgian President, that Saakashvili wanted to eliminate the Russian-backed South Ossetian separatist movement in order to head off a Serbian-style breakup of Georgia. Saakashvili may have also wanted to clear the way for his country's entry into NATO, an alliance whose rules nominally prohibit entrants from having ongoing border disputes. In any case, after a crushing military defeat and the permanent loss of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, NATO membership for Georgia now appears to be a far more distant prospect than it did in July 2008.

The Biggest Miscalculation of 2008

It remains unclear why Saakashvili, or those who supported him abroad who were hoping his planned offensive would succeed, believed that Russia would simply stand by and allow its client state in South Ossetia to be crushed. Every indication prior to the war was that Russia was eager to draw "a line in the sand" against NATO expansion somewhere, and a new untested Russian President in Medvedev would react with a show of force rather than meekly back down.

Repeated Russian military exercises just across the border in North Ossetia in the weeks before August 2008 suggest that the Russian security services had at least some awareness of Georgian war plans, either from its sources inside the Georgian government or from intercepted signals intelligence, and made at least some preparations to respond. Perhaps the biggest mystery of all, and the question that historians will be asking for years to come, is why Saakashvili thought the U.S. would risk war with Russia and ride to the rescue of his overmatched forces, when America was already engaged in two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

American Boots on the Ground in Georgia

When direct combat began between Georgian forces and Russian peacekeepers in South Ossetia in the early morning hours of August 7, the Georgian troops were wearing their U.S. Marine issued BDUs, with small Georgian flag shoulder patches, Soviet-style helmets and Kalashnikov rifles as the only way to distinguish them from their previous trainers. There were a few score U.S. Marine trainers and American security contractors on the ground in Georgia when the war started, and the risk of inadvertent contact between American and Russian forces was real. At any rate, all Americans were quickly evacuated to the U.S. Embassy in Tblisi as Russian tank columns came within twenty miles of the Georgian capital in August 2008.

The Marines were in Georgia to train Georgian troops for their ongoing peacekeeping mission in Iraq. American special forces had reportedly been cooperating with the Georgian military since 9/11 to hunt international jihadists in Georgia's mountainous Kodori Gorge region. Thus, it was no major news story when the U.S. military formally notified the Russian military about an American C-17 transport plane flying Georgian troops back to Tblisi from Iraq during the war, in order to avoid any provocations between American and Russian forces.

Postwar Tit for Tat Between the U.S. and Russia

The presence of an American warship, the USS Mount Whitney, in a

Georgian Black Sea port during the war irritated Russia. The Russians responded in kind last month by sending the warship Admiral Chelabenko to the Soviet Union's old Cold War ally Cuba, as well as to Venezuela and to the Panama Canal -- all Latin American locales traditionally in Washington's sphere of influence. The response of the State Department and White House to these "show the flag" Russian Navy junkets was essentially one big yawn. At any rate, Russian sailors enjoyed some nice shore leave in Havana as a result of the geopolitical posturing of their leadership.

The Georgia Conflict and the Middle East

The connection, however thin, between events in Georgia and in the Middle East has not been lost on many global observers of U.S.-Russia relations this year. In a bizarre example of media globalization, Alex Jones, an Austin, Texas-based American talk radio show host and professional conspiracy theorist, has been a regular guest on Russia Today TV since the Georgia War in August 2008.

Mr. Jones regularly warns his listeners about the imminent danger of "New World Order Globalist Government" and the collapse of the U.S. dollar while urging them to buy gold from his radio show sponsors. Mr. Jones has claimed that America supported Georgia against Russia in order to create a future base for military operations against Iran. The fact that there appears to be no real signs of a military buildup against Iran prior to President George W. Bush leaving office on January 20, 2009 does not seem to deter Mr. Jones from making such pronouncements. Russia Today, an English language TV channel set up in 2005 as a Russian equivalent of the Qatar-based Arab television channel Al-Jazeera, often gives Mr. Jones a platform to expound his fringe views on a regular basis.

However, it isn't just conspiracy theorists who have wondered whether U.S. policy towards Georgia has at least been partially influenced by events in the Middle East. Mark N. Katz, a professor of government and politics at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, published an article about how the Georgia conflict influenced Mideast politics, particularly the actual triangular relationship between Russia, Israel and Iran, on December 22, 2008.

Quid Pro Quo between Moscow and Jerusalem

Among Katz' most interesting claims are that Israel suspended its relatively minuscule arms and military equipment sales to Georgia, which consisted mainly of a few unmanned aerial drones and camouflage nets, several months before the war started in August 2008. Jerusalem also rejected Georgian requests for more advanced weaponry such as the Merkava tank in an act of quid pro quo with Moscow, which reportedly cancelled or delayed its own sale of S-300 surface to air missiles to Israel's enemy Iran.

How Israel and Russia Are Connected

Jerusalem rewarded Moscow for these steps by creating visa-free travel between the two countries, which have strong ethnic and language ties. Over one million Israelis speak Russian or have family ties to the former Soviet Union, and many Israeli cities feature road and street signs in English, Hebrew, Arabic and Russian. Post-Soviet Russia has long had the economic and foreign policy goal of reversing at least some of the "brain drain" caused by over a million Jews leaving the country between the 1960s and 1990s.

Russia and Iran Are Not Really Allies

Katz also dispels the myth, widely promoted by some hawks in Washington D.C., that Russia and Iran are allies against the U.S. and Israel. "Frenemies" would be the more accurate description, particularly since Iranian oil and gas may some day compete with Russian energy for European markets, though most of Iran's current output goes to consumers in India, China, Japan and the rest of Asia. Katz also surveys the Persian (Farsi)-language media to discover relatively cool attitudes towards Russia, and the recognition that historically Russia (previously the Soviet Union) and Iran have often been rivals in the Caspian Sea and Persian Gulf regions.

In light of Israel's ongoing military campaign against the Iranian-backed Hamas militia in the Gaza Strip, Katz's essay has added importance.

The Implications of the Georgia Crisis in the Middle East

by Mark N. Katz*
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The August 2008 conflict between Russia and Georgia has not only had a strong impact on the United States and Europe, but also on Israel and Iran. This article examines Israeli and Iranian reactions to the crisis, as well as its broader impact on regional energy and security concerns.

The conflict that took place between Georgian and Russian forces in August 2008 has clearly had a strong impact on Russia's relations not only with Georgia, but also with Europe and the United States. It will be argued here, though, that what happened in Georgia has also had important consequences for two Middle Eastern countries in particular`Israel and Iran`as well as for the international security environment concerning them.

This article will briefly discuss the broad impact of the Georgian crisis on Russia's relations with the West, examine Israeli and Iranian reactions to the crisis, and then explore the broader implications of the crisis both in terms of its impact on Western energy concerns and on Israeli security concerns about Iran. First, though, something needs to be said about the crisis itself.

GEORGIA AND RUSSIA`WHAT HAPPENED?

The August 2008 crisis occurred so recently and was reported on so widely that a detailed account of what happened need not be provided here. What follows is a summary of how the crisis emerged.

The Soviet Union was composed of 15 ethno-territorial `union republics,' which became independent when the USSR broke up at the end of 1991. There were, however, also a number of `autonomous republics' and other arrangements that had been created for smaller ethnic groups. Most of the autonomous republics were located inside the Russian Federation, but tiny Georgia contained three`South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Ajara. None of the union republics that seceded from the USSR in 1991 was willing to allow any of the autonomous republics inside them to secede. Russia fought two wars to prevent Chechnya from seceding from it. From the time that the Soviet Union broke up,

though, Moscow has acted in support of Georgia's autonomous republics in resisting rule from Tbilisi.[1]

Abkhazia is in Georgia's northwest, bordering the Russian Federation. South Ossetia also borders the Russian Federation and the North Ossetian autonomous republic inside Russia. Ajara is in Georgia's southwest bordering Turkey (and not Russia). It is unclear why Soviet officials chose to include the Abkhazian and South Ossetian autonomous republics inside of Georgia instead of the Russian Federation. In his narrative on the roots of the conflict he gave during his interview with CNN, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin suggested that Stalin an ethnic Georgian did this to benefit his fellow Georgians.[2]

Moscow managed to contain ethnic tension during most of the Soviet period. However, with the breakup of the USSR, it burst forth again in Georgia as well as other former Soviet republics. Under its first elected president, the ultra-nationalist Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Georgia attempted to suppress Abkhaz and South Ossetian efforts to secede. Georgia's efforts failed, though, when Russian forces intervened in support of the Abkhaz and South Ossetians. Civil war broke out in Georgia itself, which led to the downfall of Gamsakhurdia and the rise to power of Eduard Shevardnadze who had been the Communist Party boss of Georgia in the Soviet era before Mikhail Gorbachev appointed him as Soviet foreign minister. During this turbulent period (1991-1993), most Georgians were expelled from Abkhazia (where they had been the majority), but many remained in South Ossetia.[3]

During Shevardnadze's authoritarian presidency, South Ossetia and Abkhazia became 'frozen conflicts.' With Russian support, secessionist governments ruled in both regions despite their self-proclaimed independence not being recognized by any other government (including Russia's). Although it did not formally assert independence, an ally of Moscow also ruled over Ajara with the support of Russian forces stationed there. The Shevardnadze government claimed and the international community recognized these territories as an integral part of Georgia. Shevardnadze, however, did not attempt to regain control over them as vigorously as his successor, Mikheil Saakashvili.

In the November 2003 'Rose Revolution,' Shevardnadze was ousted by Saakashvili who then went on to win a landslide election to become president. Though Shevardnadze's relations with Moscow were strained and his ties to the West relatively good, the American-educated Saakashvili was far more enthusiastically pro-Western as well as openly anti-Russian. Yet in addition to claiming to be a democrat (a claim that some of his subsequent actions would call into question), he was also a strong nationalist who was determined to reassert Georgian control over the three breakaway regions.[4]

By summer 2004, he succeeded in asserting Georgian control over Ajara the autonomous republic bordering Turkey and not Russia through organizing mass demonstrations there similar to the ones that led to his own rise to power in the Rose Revolution. Moscow actually behaved cooperatively in this instance and withdrew Russian forces from Ajara. Saakashvili's success in Ajara, though, only served to whet his appetite for retaking Abkhazia and South Ossetia as well. Moscow, however, was determined to prevent this especially since Saakashvili appeared (in Moscow's eyes) distinctly ungrateful for its cooperativeness in helping him gain possession of Ajara. Moscow instead began to see Saakashvili as more of an adversary since Georgia

enthusiastically participated in pipeline projects for petroleum from Azerbaijan (and potentially Central Asia) to reach Western markets without passing through Russian territory, and as Saakashvili actively sought NATO membership for Georgia.[5] The success of the 'Orange Revolution' in Ukraine in 2004 appears to have convinced Moscow that the United States was orchestrating pro-Western transitions in former Soviet republics ultimately intended to culminate in one that would oust the Putin regime in Russia.[6]

Russian-Georgian relations deteriorated further as Tbilisi pushed for NATO membership and the reintegration of Abkhazia and South Ossetia while Moscow stepped up its efforts to thwart these aims. Moscow claims that the recent conflict began on August 7, 2008, when Georgian forces launched an unprovoked attack against the South Ossetian capital.[7] Georgia claimed that it was reacting to the massive influx of Russian troops into the area.[8] Yet while how the conflict began is disputed, there is now no doubt about how it ended: the Russian military quickly routed Georgian forces, solidified Moscow's hold over both South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and pushed into Georgia proper. Moscow then extended diplomatic recognition to both regions.[9]

In response to a French-led EU mediation effort, Moscow began to slowly withdraw its troops from Georgia proper. Despite Western demands, though, it has shown no signs of withdrawing its forces from South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Indeed, it has proclaimed its intention to keep Russian troops stationed in both.[10]

IMPACT ON THE WEST

Russia's quick victory against Georgia gave rise to concerns about a newly aggressive Russia being both willing and able to assert itself militarily not only here, but elsewhere in the former Soviet Union and perhaps even beyond. Furthermore, the West's inability to stop Russia from doing as it pleased in Georgia was seen as evidence of its being both unable and unwilling to prevent Russian expansion and that this weak reaction would only encourage the Kremlin to engage in it again.[11]

Yet while President Bush declared that Moscow's use of force against Georgia was 'disproportionate,' it could be described as limited and discreet. What Russia did in this conflict was solidify its hold over two territories - Abkhazia and South Ossetia - that were already under its control. Further, this was a move that appears to have been supported by the Abkhaz and South Ossetians themselves.[12] Although Russian troops also moved into Georgia proper where the local population definitely did not support them, they did not overrun the entire country or forcibly replace its government (though Moscow frequently expressed its desire for Saakashvili to resign). Moscow completed its troop withdrawal from Georgia proper on October 8, 2008, thus leaving the situation much as it was before the conflict: Tbilisi in control of Georgia proper and Moscow in control of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.[13] Even Moscow's extension of diplomatic recognition to these two governments in August 2008 can be seen as less significant than its having worked to set them up years earlier.

Yet while all this may be true, Russia's successful intervention in Georgia has far reaching implications. The United States and many European governments have become increasingly concerned that Russia will be able to extract concessions from Europe as a result of growing European dependence on natural gas imports from and through

Russia. Western governments have sought to reduce this dependence on Russia through promoting pipeline routes that do not run through it. Azerbaijan possesses enormous quantities of oil and gas. During the Soviet era, pipelines from Azerbaijan ran north into Russia. At Western urging, pipelines have already been built running from Azerbaijan through Georgia to the Black Sea coast (Baku-Supsa), and more importantly, from Azerbaijan through Georgia to Turkey's Mediterranean coast (Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan). If they can be built across the Caspian, pipelines from Turkmenistan and/or Kazakhstan to Azerbaijan could also allow Central Asian oil and gas to flow through Georgia to the West.[14]

Pipeline routes through Georgia are especially important to America and the West since they bypass not only Russia, but also Iran which the United States has had hostile relations with ever since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, and which many European governments have become increasingly uneasy about due to concerns that Tehran might be trying to acquire nuclear weapons. With the construction of pipelines running from Azerbaijan through Armenia to Turkey impossible so long as the Azeri-Armenian dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh remains unresolved, pipelines through Georgia are absolutely essential for Caspian Basin natural gas to reach Europe without running through Russia or Iran.

What the August 2008 Russian military intervention in Georgia demonstrated is that Moscow can quickly and easily disrupt the flow of oil and gas through Georgia. Russian forces did not actually have to seize control of the pipelines to accomplish this since the pipeline operators themselves shut them down. What this showed is that while pipelines through Georgia may be vital to the West, they are also extremely vulnerable. Nor did Moscow appear particularly concerned that the West would consider Russian behavior in Georgia as threatening to European energy security concerns. If anything, the Kremlin seemed intent on conveying the message that it was Russia, not Georgia, that the West needed to have good relations with in order to ensure cooperation on energy as well as other issues of importance to the West. Indeed, Russian officials warned that it would be foolish for the West to impose sanctions against Moscow for what happened in Georgia since the West would lose more than Moscow would.[15]

THE ISRAELI DIMENSION

Israel had had good relations with Georgia before the August 2008 conflict broke out. Indeed, Israeli firms were important suppliers of weaponry to Georgia. An individual with close ties to Israel, Temur Yakobashvili, serves as Georgia's minister of reintegration (i.e., for Georgia's reacquisition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia).[16]

Israel also had relatively good, albeit complex, relations with Russia at this time. Moscow had ended diplomatic relations with the Jewish state during the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. Ties between them were restored only in October 1991 at the end of the Gorbachev era. When Moscow pursued a pro-Western foreign policy in the late Gorbachev and early Yeltsin years, Russian-Israeli relations were quite friendly. However, they were strained in the late 1990's when the more anti-American Yevgeny Primakov served as the ailing Yeltsin's foreign minister (1996-1998) and later as prime minister (1998-1999).[17]

Russian-Israeli relations, though, improved after Putin became president. Several factors appear to account for this, including a growing trade relationship, a shared view that Russia and Israel were both beset by Islamist terrorists, the close relationship that sprung

up between Putin and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon (whom Putin appreciated for being one of the few world leaders to express support for Russian intervention in Chechnya), and (most unusually for a Russian leader) Putin's positive regard for Jewish people, which he reportedly developed during his childhood.[18] Putin even visited Israel in April 2005.[19]

Russian-Israeli relations, though, grew distant after Moscow announced a major arms sale to Syria in 2005,[20] and even more so when (just after Ariel Sharon became incapacitated and Hamas won the Palestinian parliamentary elections in January 2006) Putin decided to allow a Hamas delegation to visit Moscow even though the Quartet (the United States, EU, UN, and Russia) had resolved not to talk with it until it recognized Israel, renounced violence, and adhered to previous Israeli-Palestinian agreements.[21] Israel was also unhappy about Moscow's continuing support for the Iranian nuclear program as well as its acting to soften UN Security Council sanctions against Iran for failing to comply with the IAEA and the Security Council on this issue. Despite their differences, however, Russian-Israeli relations remained relatively good.[22]

The United States and most NATO members expressed strong support for Georgia and criticism of Russia after the outbreak of the conflict in August 2008. Israel, by contrast, distanced itself from Georgia and sought to placate Russia instead. When Russia asked Israel to stop providing military support to Georgia just prior to the conflict, 'The Russians noted that they periodically accede to Israeli requests not to provide weapon systems to countries that threaten Israel. The foreign ministry in Jerusalem decided that it was time to put an end to the weapons sales fete, which was threatening relations with Russia.'[23] Georgian officials first tried to link Israel to their cause by noting that Georgian forces using Israeli weapons had performed effectively against their Russian opponents. Later, though, they expressed outrage at Israel distancing itself from Georgia 'at Russia's behest.'[24] The Russians, of course, criticized Israel for having provided any military assistance to Georgia at all.[25]

A report that Moscow had signed a new arms agreement with Syria on August 21, 2008 was followed in early September by a statement from the Israeli ambassador to Russia noting that Israel had refused a Georgian request to buy 300 Merkava tanks (i.e., Israel refrained from helping Georgia to a greater extent than it actually did), and stressing that Israel wanted close relations with Russia.[26] The Russians themselves acknowledged that Israeli arms sales to Georgia were limited when the deputy chief of the Russian General Staff noted what Israel had sold to Tbilisi: eight drone planes, 100 mine clearing charges, and 500 sets of camouflage nets. He also noted that there had been no resumption of Israeli-Georgian military cooperation.[27] The Russian newspaper Kommersant reported approvingly that Israel had banned its arms dealers from visiting Georgia. 'Of interest,' it noted, 'is that the Israeli government ordered the freeze because of objections from Russia. In Israel, they apprehend that the Kremlin may set to large-scale supplies of sophisticated weapons to the states of the Middle East that are hostile to Israel, including Iran.'[28]

Israeli concern about the prospect of a nuclear Iran is particularly intense. Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad has called frequently for Israel's destruction. In addition, conservative Israelis believe he sees himself as having 'a mystical connection to the last Shi'a Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, and appears to believe that a cataclysmic event, such as a nuclear war with Israel, might bring about his return

to earth.'[29] Unlike 'normal' nuclear states, in other words, a nuclear Iran might not be deterred by the threat of massive retaliation from launching a first strike. As Robert O. Freedman has explained, this Israeli fear about the intentions of a nuclear Iran is so intense that Israel may well be willing, despite U.S. objections, to launch a military attack against Iran in order to prevent Tehran from acquiring nuclear weapons.[30]

Iran, though, could limit the damage from any such attack with sophisticated Russian air defense weapons`if it could get them from Moscow. Given Moscow's threats of retaliation against any party aiding Georgia, Israel's distancing itself from Tbilisi is clearly aimed at not provoking Moscow to supply Tehran with them.

THE IRANIAN DIMENSION

Though Moscow and Tehran are both hostile toward the United States and the West, this has not made them friends with each other. Prior to the conflict in Georgia, there have been serious differences between Moscow and Tehran over several issues. Further, since the outbreak of the conflict in Georgia, Iranian press commentary has revealed that there is a debate going on concerning whether Russian actions in Georgia have helped or hurt Iran, as well as what Iran's interests are in light of it.

The history of Iranian animosity toward Russia is quite long`far longer than that of Iranian animosity toward the United States. Incidents Iranians resent Russia for include the latter's seizure from Iran of the South Caucasus (including the northern part of Azerbaijan) in the early nineteenth century, expansion into Central Asia at Iran's expense, intervention in northern Iran in the early twentieth century and during World War II, and attempts to promote separatism in Iran's northwest both after World War I and World War II. Soviet backing of the Tudeh (Iranian communist party) during the Shah's era as well as during the Iranian Revolution, when it competed with Khomeini's forces for power, was seen as an attempt to support a group that would serve Moscow's interests. In the post-Soviet period, though, Russian-Iranian relations improved significantly.[31]

The United States (as well as Europe and Israel) have become increasingly concerned about Russian-Iranian cooperation, especially in the nuclear realm. What must be borne in mind, though, is that on three highly important issues that Washington is displeased with Moscow about for helping Tehran, Tehran is also displeased with Moscow over for not helping Iran sufficiently.

Washington is unhappy that Moscow has worked to soften UNSC resolutions imposing sanctions on Iran for not cooperating with the IAEA and 5+1 on the nuclear issue. Tehran, for its part, is upset with Moscow for voting in favor of any UNSC sanctions against Iran at all and for even allowing the issue to be dealt with by the UNSC when it could prevent this.[32] Washington is also disappointed that Moscow has been building a nuclear reactor for Iran at Bushehr. Yet Iran is unhappy with Moscow for constantly delaying the completion of this project, originally scheduled for 1999 but which, despite its latest promises, may not be operational before the end of 2008`or even later.[33] Both Moscow and Tehran opposed the Bush administration's plan to deploy a ballistic missile defense system to Poland and the Czech Republic aimed at Tehran. Tehran, though, was deeply displeased in mid-2007 when Putin attempted to prevent it through offering to share with the United States the Russian radar station in

Azerbaijan.[34]

There are other issues that also divide them, including how to delimit the Caspian, and Moscow's proposals for resolving the Iranian nuclear crisis through enriching uranium for Iran, which Tehran doesn't fully accept because it insists on enriching at least some of its own.[35] It is with this background in mind that the Iranian reaction to the August 2008 Russian-Georgian conflict must be understood.

The Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman articulated a cautious response, calling for a cease-fire and a peaceful end to the conflict.[36] Some Iranian press commentary, though, predicted that the deterioration in Russian-American relations resulting from the conflict would benefit Iran, because it anticipated that Russia would become less willing to cooperate with the United States and the EU-3 (Britain, France, and Germany) in pressuring Iran on the nuclear issue.[37] President Ahmadinejad, true to form, blamed the outbreak of the conflict on Zionists when he was in Bishkek to attend the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit.[38] However, commentary warning against Iran moving too close to Russia soon sprang up.

In the reformist daily Aftab-e Yazd, Majlis member Mostafa Kavakebian wrote, '[W]e must not put all our eggs in the basket of the bilateral ties with Russia' and even argued that Iran should not have a negative view of the American ballistic missile defense agreement with Poland since this was preferable than such a system being based in Azerbaijan (as Russia had proposed).[39] In an example of Iranian worst case analysis, another reformist daily, E'temad-e Melli, declared that Russian-American discord could lead Russia to be more helpful to Iran, but predicted that the United States would soon tone down its rhetoric against Russia, and that Russia 'might well rejoin America in its attempts against Iran's nuclear program.'[40] The conservative Fars News Agency noted one benefit to Iran from the Georgia conflict: the disruption of Azerbaijan's oil export routes through Georgia resulting in some Azeri crude (5-10,000 bpd) going through Iran.[41]

While many in the West decried Putin's remarks during his CNN interview implying that Russia would stop cooperating with the West on the Iranian nuclear issue, the conservative Keyhan noted the limits of Putin's willingness to help Iran:

Putin had openly said that a change in Moscow's stance towards Iran depended on an absence of change in the stance of the West towards Georgia and Ossetia. And this implicitly means that the Russians, immediately after obtaining adequate concessions, would be ready to resume their past conduct and cooperate with the West against Iran. Naturally, this is a fact which would never remain concealed from the eyes of the strategic decision-making body in Iran.[42]

He further noted: 'In the West there is a serious viewpoint which maintains that dealing with Iran and accepting a nuclear Iran is an easier option than making a strategic concession to Russia in war-time conditions.'[43] Aftab-e Yazd continued this theme, urging Iran to use the Caucasus crisis to warm up to the West and move away from Russia: 'And try as the Russians have to prove their 'unfriendly' attitude to Iran, some Iranian statesmen have simply refused to see this.'[44]

Putin's statement that the Russian position on the Iranian nuclear issue coincided with those of Europe and the United States was also decried. Indeed, Russia was seen as going along with America over Iran even at the height of Moscow and Washington disagreeing over

Georgia. The article called attention to the Russians' `misperception' that Iran has no choice but to put up with their unattractive conduct.'[45]

E'temad (reformist) appeared to criticize Ahmadinejad's SCO summit remarks, noting that:

At exactly the moment when Iranian officials were treating the Shanghai summit as an opportunity for allying themselves with Moscow in the Caucasian game, Vladimir Putin's remarks about Russia's commitment to cooperation with America over Iran's nuclear case threw all anticipations into disarray and once again, the hope that Russia would take Iran's side in the Security Council was diminished more than ever before.[46]

In addition, while many in the West see Russia as having won out in Georgia, the pro-government Abrar declared that the `Russians are the big losers of Georgia War' since Russian actions had only resulted in pushing Georgia even further toward the West.[47] Dr. Ali Majedi, Iran's former ambassador to Japan, told the conservative Jomhuri-ye Eslami that, `The Russians' behavior is so complicated that I believe if, with some degree of flexibility, we manage to maintain our contract with the Western companies it would be much better for us than having any partnership with Russia.'[48]

The strongly conservative Javan (believed to be close to the Revolutionary Guard Corps) reacted with great suspicion to the Russian offer of increased support to the Iranian nuclear program:

In this connection the Islamic Republic of Iran will certainly approach this stance of the Russians in a cautious manner because nuclear assistance to Iran would be tantamount to Iran's entry into the camp of Russia. And now it is very difficult to believe whether the claim by Russian officials in this respect ought to be construed as an [attempt to provide] assistance or seen as a tactical ploy. This is because the Iranian nuclear card would only help to turn the Russia-West crisis in the Caucasus region into an Iran-West crisis'[49]

This press commentary, of course, may not be indicative of Iranian government policy. Still, the fact that it is occurring in a country where freedom of the press is circumscribed indicates that there is deep concern in Iran over what Russian behavior in Georgia means for Tehran.

SYRIA AND HAMAS

The reaction of Syria and Hamas to the Georgian crisis was very different from that of Iran. Damascus came out squarely in favor of Russia in the August 2008 conflict. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad stated, `I want to express support to Russia in the situations around Abkhazia and South Ossetia. We understand the essence of Russia's position and believe its military reaction was a response to a provocation by Georgia.'[50] He appears to have expressed these sentiments as part of Syria's overall effort to obtain advanced weapons from Russia, especially the Iskander short-range missile, which could strike targets throughout most of Israel from Syria.[51] According to the Russian military newspaper, Krasnaya Zvezda, Damascus has even signaled that it is `ready to consider' a proposal by Moscow to deploy Iskanders to Syria in response to U.S. air defense plans`even though Moscow has not yet made any such proposal.[52]

While these plans have yet to come to fruition, Moscow and Damascus have agreed to resume their naval cooperation. During the 1970s and 1980s, the Soviet Navy made use of the Syrian port of Tartus, but abandoned it at the time that the USSR collapsed. In September 2008, Russian and Syrian naval leaders met, and the Russian Navy was 'engaged in restoring the moorage in the Syrian port of Tartus for the Russian Navy.' [53]

Hamas has gone one better than Syria by actually recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. [54] It appears to have made this move not only to curry Moscow's favor vis-à-vis Israel but also vis-à-vis its Palestinian rival, Fatah.

The enthusiastic support of Syria and Hamas for Russian action in Georgia compared to Iranian wariness regarding it suggests that Syria and Hamas did not coordinate their policies with Iran on this issue, but pursued them independently. This may be an indicator that Tehran has less influence over Syria and Hamas than some fear or than Tehran itself might like.

Damascus's expression of support for Moscow's position vis-à-vis Georgia was followed by signs of deepening security cooperation between Russia and Syria. The latter, though, may have already been in process when the former occurred, and not caused by it. Nor does this increased Russian-Syrian cooperation signal the end of Russian-Israeli cooperation.

Further, it is not at all clear whether Hamas will receive any reward from Moscow in return for its recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In late September, Hamas criticized the Quartet (which includes Russia as well as the United States, EU, and UN) for allegedly displaying a 'pro-Israeli bias.' [55]

BROADER IMPLICATIONS

Russian intervention in Georgia has heightened U.S. and European concerns about the re-emergence of a Russian threat, particularly with regard to the security of petroleum pipelines running through Georgia. It is also clear that, unlike Syria and Hamas which expressed their approval for Russian actions in Georgia, Iran has reacted far more ambivalently. Tehran certainly has not endorsed Moscow's intervention in Georgia. Indeed, this appears to have reinforced Iranian concerns and suspicions about Russia.

As Ellen Knickmeyer reported in The Washington Post, 'The United States has tried to discourage European countries and Turkey from turning to Iran for oil and gas. With Russia demonstrating its ability to control supplies through Georgia and the rest of the Caucasus, Iran's supplies are going to look more attractive to U.S. allies in Europe, analysts noted.' [56] Indeed, in late September 2008, Iranian deputy oil minister Akbar Torkan offered to build a gas pipeline from Iran to Europe. [57]

There are two strong incentives for Iran to compete with Russia in supplying gas to Europe. First, Tehran would not only gain much needed revenue from its own exports, but also through serving as a transit corridor for Caspian Basin petroleum that is less subject than Georgia to Russian disruption. Second, to the extent that Europe does become (or even hopes to become) more reliant on Iran for its gas imports, it is more likely to seek accommodation with Iran and not confrontation.

At the same time, however, Europe, the United States, and Israel have an ongoing concern about the prospect of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons. The level of concern among them about this, however, varies. Israel, understandably, is the most acutely concerned. Israeli politicians and military officials have openly discussed the possibility of bombing Iran in order to prevent it from acquiring nuclear weapons. The United States also is very concerned that Iran not acquire nuclear weapons. Yet as Robert O. Freedman has pointed out, Washington increasingly does not see either an American or Israeli attack as the way to prevent this. Such an attack might only retard, not eliminate, the Iranian nuclear program. It might also lead Iran to take steps that would weaken the U.S. positions in Iraq and Afghanistan.[58] While European governments differ somewhat, it is fair to say that Europe opposes the use of force against Iran for three reasons: 1) European opposition to the use of force generally, 2) opposition to U.S. or U.S.-sponsored (i.e., Israeli) unilateralism, and increasingly, 3) fear of how an attack on Iran might harm Europe's hopes for importing gas from and through Iran.

One of the most important results, then, of Russia's intervention into Georgia may well be to ignite tension within the West between those who see Iran and those who see Russia as the primary security threat which it is essential to enlist the other for support against.

Mark N. Katz, a professor of government and politics at George Mason University (Fairfax, Virginia, USA), is a specialist on Russian foreign policy toward the Middle East. His most recent articles include 'Russia and Algeria: Partners or Competitors?' Middle East Policy (Winter 2007); 'Russia and Qatar,' Middle East Review of International Affairs (MERIA) (December 2007); 'The Emerging Saudi-Russian Partnership,' Mideast Monitor (January-March 2008); 'Russian-Iranian Relations in the Ahmadinejad Era,' Middle East Journal (Spring 2008); and 'The Russian-Libyan Rapprochement: What Has Moscow Gained?' Middle East Policy (Fall 2008).

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