
Israeli involvement in the Georgian-Russian war

By Yusuf Fernandez

Press TV, Madrid - 17/8/2008

For seven years, Israeli companies have been helping the Georgian army to prepare itself for a war against Russia through arms deals, training infantry units and offering security advice, The Jerusalem Post recently claimed.

The war between Russia and Georgia has served to bring Israel's intensive involvement in the Caucasus into the limelight.

'Israel's defense industries have sold remote-piloted vehicles (RPVs) -one of which was shot down by Russian fighters in May-, automatic turrets for armored vehicles, antiaircraft systems, communication systems, shells and rocket to Georgias' the Post said.

The Moscow Times has reported that, according to Koba Liklikadze, an independent military expert based in Tbilisi, Israelis have also helped upgrade Soviet-designed Su-25 ground attack jets assembled in Georgia. Israel has been supplying Georgia with infantry weapons and electronics for artillery systems too.

According to the Post, the initiative to sell arms to Georgia was taken by a group of Georgian citizens who immigrated to Israel and became businessmen.

'They contacted defense industry officials and arms dealers and told them that Georgia had relatively large budgets and could be interested in purchasing Israeli weapons,' a source involved in arms exports told the Post.

The fact that Georgia's Defense minister, Davit Kezerashvili, is a former Israeli citizen and is fluent in Hebrew contributed to the operation.

An Israeli marketing expert told the Israeli newspaper Maariv that 'To every Israeli agent representing an Israeli defense company is attached a cousin of the Defense minister, who opens the doors for him.'

There are about 80,000 Georgian Jews living in Israel. They held demonstrations against Russia during the war. A group of young Israelis of Georgian decent told The Jerusalem Post during a protest outside the Russian embassy in Tel Aviv that they are trying to arrange a flight to Tbilisi to join the Georgian army.

Moreover, Israel's massive Russian-speaking population also leaned towards Georgia in the conflict. Many former Russian Jews participated in the demonstrations and harshly criticized Russia.

Among the Israeli officials who took advantage of the opportunity and started doing business in Georgia were former Tel Aviv mayor Roni Milo and his brother Shlomo, former director-general of the Military Industries, as well as 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 had been conducted, Hirsch has served as trainer of Georgian elite troops. He received approval from the Israeli Defense Ministry for that mission.

Israeli military expert Yossi Melman wrote in Ha'aretz that in past years Georgia has become a real El Dorado for Israeli arms dealers and representatives of the army and intelligence agencies.

According to Israeli sources, Gal Hirsch gave the Georgian army advice on the establishment of elite units and held various courses in the fields of combat intelligence and fighting in built-up areas.

'The Israelis should be proud of themselves for the Israeli training and education received by the Georgian soldiers,' Georgian Minister of State for Reintegration of Georgia, Temuri Yakobashvili, who is also Jew and has strong links with Israel, told Israel's Army Radio. 'We are now in a fight against the great Russia,' he said.

Former Israeli ambassador to Georgia Shabtai Zur told Ynetnews that 'Georgian government officials used to tell me that they wanted to model their army after the Israeli army'. He added that since Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili took office the Georgian Army had seen advancements in various fields, specifically the enlistment of women in the army and the recruitment of reservists. 'In my opinion these developments are due in part to advice Georgia received from Israeli companies that operate there' said Zur.

The Israeli site DEBKAFfile, which has strong links with Israeli intelligence and security establishments, recently claimed that Israeli military advisers had aided Georgian tanks and infantry in capturing the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali.

The site pointed out that Israeli presence in Georgia is not only related to the arms sales. Israeli firms, along with Western oil companies, are interested in pipelines that transport oil from Azerbaijan and gas from Turkmenistan and transit Georgia, while bypassing Russia. Oil and gas arrive at the Turkish port of Ceyhan and can later be transported to the oil terminal at the Israeli port of Ashkelon and the Red Sea port of Eilat.

DEBKAFfile also reported that last year the Georgian president, Mikheil Saakashvili 'commissioned from private Israeli security firms several hundred military advisers, estimated at up to 1,000, to train the Georgian armed forces in commando, air, sea, armored and artillery combat tactics. They also offer instruction on military intelligence and security for the regime. Tbilisi also purchased weapons, intelligence and electronic warfare systems from Israel.'

'These advisers were undoubtedly deeply involved in the Georgian army's preparations to conquer the South Ossetian capital.'

In recent months, Moscow repeatedly demanded that Tel Aviv halted its military assistance to Georgia, finally threatening a crisis in bilateral relations. Israel responded by saying that the only assistance rendered Tbilisi was 'defensive.'

Some bases where used by Israeli advisers to train the Georgian troops were bombed by Russia although they were not located in the area where the battles are taking place. The Russian navy controlled Georgia's coastline, and the Russian air force controlled the skies to prevent military goods of Israel and other countries from getting in Georgia during the war.

Shortly before the war broke out, Israeli official sources told media that Israel had decided to halt all sales of military equipment to Georgia in order to give Israel leverage with Moscow in its attempts to persuade Russia not to ship arms and equipment to Iran and Syria.

However, Temur Yakobashvili denied the report, saying, 'There has been no decision by Israel to stop selling weapons. The gossip about that in the Israeli media is linked to the internal political process in Israel.'

Israeli involvement in the war has also been denounced by some experts.

AFP reporter Howard Carson quoted Swiss-based Israeli investigative journalist and author Shraga Elam as saying that Israel, with US connivance, was behind the Georgian attack against South Ossetia.

'There is an obvious Israeli involvement in the present conflict between Georgia and Russia,' Elam said.

Israeli support for Georgia will probably have serious consequences for the relations between Russia and Israel. Russia has many means to respond to this Israeli involvement in the Caucasus that has cost many Russian lives.

Moscow could actually ignore Israeli demands to stop its military sales to countries in the Middle East and control the activities of Zionist groups operating in Russia.

Georgia is not the only country in the Caucasus region where Israel is trying to increase its presence. Azerbaijan is another key country for the Israelis because it owns huge energy resources and is a neighbor of Iran.

On 15-18 August 2007, Israeli Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Strategic Affairs Avigdor Lieberman paid an official visit to Azerbaijan 'to explore mutual political and economic interests'.

'Azerbaijan is an interesting and strategic country for Israel,' said Lieberman at the end of his visit, APA news agency reported.

However, the position of Azerbaijan, which is also a member of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), is delicate because the Azeri people and some of its Muslim neighbors do not want to see an Israeli presence in the country.
