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## Israel backs Georgia in Caspian Oil Pipeline Battle with Russia

### DEBKAfile Exclusive Report

August 8, 2008



Georgian tanks and infantry, aided by Israeli military advisers, captured the capital of breakaway South Ossetia, Tskhinvali, early Friday, Aug. 8, bringing the Georgian-Russian conflict over the province to a military climax.

Russian prime minister Vladimir Putin threatened a "military response."

Former Soviet Georgia called up its military reserves after Russian warplanes bombed its new positions in the renegade province.

In Moscow's first response to the fall of Tskhinvali, president Dimitry Medvedev ordered the Russian army to prepare for a national emergency after calling the UN Security Council into emergency session early Friday.

Reinforcements were rushed to the Russian "peacekeeping force" present in the region to support the separatists.

Georgian tanks entered the capital after heavy overnight heavy aerial strikes, in which dozens of people were killed.

Lado Gurgenedze, Georgia's prime minister, said on Friday that Georgia will continue its military operation in South Ossetia until a "durable peace" is reached. "As soon as a durable peace takes hold we need to move forward with dialogue and peaceful negotiations."

DEBKAfile's geopolitical experts note that on the surface level, the Russians are backing the separatists of S. Ossetia and neighboring Abkhazia as payback for the strengthening of American influence in tiny Georgia and its 4.5 million inhabitants. However, more immediately, the conflict has been sparked by the race for control over the pipelines carrying oil and gas out of the Caspian region.

The Russians may just bear with the pro-US Georgian president Mikhail Saakashvili's ambition to bring his country into NATO. But they draw a heavy line against his plans and those of Western oil companies, including Israeli firms, to route the oil routes from Azerbaijan and the gas lines from Turkmenistan, which transit Georgia, through Turkey instead of hooking them up to Russian pipelines.

Saakashvili need only back away from this plan for Moscow to ditch the two provinces' revolt against Tbilisi. As long as he sticks to his guns, South Ossetia and Abkhazia will wage separatist wars.

DEBKAfile discloses Israel's interest in the conflict from its exclusive military sources:

Jerusalem owns a strong interest in Caspian oil and gas pipelines reach the Turkish terminal port of Ceyhan, rather than the Russian network. Intense negotiations are afoot between Israel Turkey, Georgia, Turkmenistan and Azarbaijan for pipelines to reach Turkey and thence to Israel's oil terminal at Ashkelon and on to its Red Sea port of Eilat. From there, supertankers can carry the gas and oil to the Far East through the Indian Ocean.

Aware of Moscow's sensitivity on the oil question, Israel offered Russia a stake in the project but was rejected.

Last year, the Georgian president 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 central regime. Tbilisi also

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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 Friday.

In recent weeks, Moscow has repeatedly demanded that Jerusalem halt its military assistance to Georgia, finally threatening a crisis in bilateral relations. Israel responded by saying that the only assistance rendered Tbilisi was "defensive."

This has not gone down well in the Kremlin. Therefore, as the military crisis intensifies in South Ossetia, Moscow may be expected to punish Israel for its intervention.

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