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Tel Aviv to Tbilisi: Israel's role in the Russia-Georgia war

Ali Abunimah, The Electronic Intifada



Israelis wave both Georgian and Israeli flags as they chant anti-Russian slogans during a demonstration outside the Russian embassy in Tel Aviv, 11 August. (Gali Tibbon/AFP/Getty Images)

August 12, 2008

From the moment Georgia launched a surprise attack on the tiny breakaway region of South Ossetia last week, prompting a fierce Russian counterattack, Israel has been trying to distance itself from the conflict. This is understandable: with Georgian forces on the retreat, large numbers of civilians killed and injured, and Russia's fury unabated, Israel's deep involvement is severely embarrassing.

The collapse of the Georgian offensive represents not only a disaster for that country and its US-backed leaders, but another blow to the myth of Israel's military prestige and prowess. Worse, Israel fears that Russia could retaliate by stepping up its military assistance to Israel's adversaries including Iran.

"Israel is following with great concern the developments in South Ossetia and Abkhazia and hopes the violence will end," its foreign ministry said, adding with uncharacteristic doveishness, "Israel recognizes the territorial integrity of Georgia and calls for a peaceful solution."

Tbilisi's top diplomat in Tel Aviv complained about the lackluster Israeli

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:: Autodeter-
 minazione e

resistenza irakena
di Aldo Bernardini,
Ordinario di Diritto
internazionale
all'Università di
Teramo

:: ONU - XX
Assemblea Generale
(1965):

La XX Assemblea
Generale dell'ONU
(1965) dichiara "la
legittimità della lotta
da parte dei popoli
sotto oppressione
coloniale, per
esercitare il loro diritto
all' autodeter-
minazione e
all'indipendenza".
Inoltre, l'Assemblea
invita "tutti gli Stati a
fornire assistenza
morale e materiale ai
movimenti di
liberazione nazionale
nei territori coloniali".

:: ONU - Risoluzione
1514

"L'Assemblea
Generale dichiara che:
la soggezione dei
popoli a dominio
straniero, conquista e
asservimento
costituisce una
negazione dei diritti
umani fondamentali, è
contraria alla Carta
delle Nazioni Unite ed
è un impedimento alla
promozione della
pace e della
cooperazione
mondiali.

Tutti i popoli hanno
diritto all' autodeter-
minazione; in virtù di
tale diritto essi
devono liberamente
determinare il loro
status politico e
liberamente
perseguire il loro
sviluppo economico,
sociale e culturale".

:: Convenzione di
Ginevra, Protocollo
Addizionale I (1977):
La lotta armata può
essere usata, come
ultima risorsa, come
mezzo per esercitare
il diritto all' autodeter-
minazione.

:: Tribunale penale
internazionale

In base allo Statuto
del Tribunale penale
internazionale, sono
definiti "crimini di
guerra":

- (1) attacchi lanciati
intenzionalmente
contro popolazione
civili in quanto tali o
contro civili che non
prendano
direttamente parte
alle ostilità;
- (4) attacchi lanciati
intenzionalmente nella
consapevolezza che
gli stessi avranno
come conseguenza la
perdita di vite umane
tra la popolazione
civile, e lesioni a civili
o danni a proprietà
civili ovvero danni
diffusi duraturi e gravi

response to his country's predicament and perhaps overestimating Israeli influence, called for Israeli "diplomatic pressure on Moscow." Just like Israel, the diplomat said, Georgia is fighting a war on "terrorism." Israeli officials politely told the Georgians that "the address for that type of pressure was Washington" (Herb Keinon, "Tbilisi wants Israel to pressure Russia," *The Jerusalem Post*, 11 August 2008).

While Israel was keen to downplay its role, Georgia perhaps hoped that flattery might draw Israel further in. Georgian minister Temur Yakobashvili -- whom the Israeli daily *Haaretz* stressed was Jewish -- told Israeli army radio that "Israel should be proud of its military which trained Georgian soldiers." Yakobashvili claimed rather implausibly, according to *Haaretz*, that "a small group of Georgian soldiers were able to wipe out an entire Russian military division, thanks to the Israeli training" ("Georgian minister tells Israel Radio: Thanks to Israeli training, we're fending off Russian military," *Haaretz*, 11 August 2008).

Since 2000, Israel has sold hundreds of millions of dollars in arms and combat training to Georgia. Weapons included guns, ammunition, shells, tactical missile systems, anti-aircraft systems, automatic turrets for armored vehicles, electronic equipment and remotely piloted aircraft. These sales were authorized by the Israeli defense ministry (Arie Egozi, "War in Georgia: The Israeli connection," *Ynet*, 10 August 2008).

Training also involved officers from Israel's Shin Bet secret service -- which has for decades carried out extrajudicial executions and torture of Palestinians in the occupied territories -- the Israeli police, and the country's major arms companies Elbit and Rafael.

The Tel Aviv-Tbilisi military axis appears to have been cemented at the highest levels, and according to *YNet*, "The fact that Georgia's defense minister, Davit Kezerashvili, is a former Israeli who is fluent in Hebrew contributed to this cooperation." Others involved in the brisk arms trade included former Israeli minister and Tel Aviv mayor Roni Milo as well as several senior Israeli military officers.

The key liaison was Reserve Brigadier General Gal Hirsch who commanded Israeli forces on the border with Lebanon during the July 2006 Second Lebanon War. (Yossi Melman, "Georgia Violence - A frozen alliance," *Haaretz*, 10 August 2008). He resigned from the army after the Winograd commission severely criticized Israel's conduct of its war against Lebanon and an internal Israeli army investigation blamed Hirsch for the seizure of two soldiers by Hizballah.

According to one of the Israeli combat trainers, an officer in an "elite" Israel army unit, Hirsch and colleagues would sometimes personally supervise the training of Georgian forces which included "house-to-house fighting." The training was carried out through several "private" companies with close links to the Israeli military.

As the violence raged in Georgia, the trainer was desperately trying to contact his former Georgian students on the battlefield via mobile phone: the Israelis wanted to know whether the Georgians had "internalized Israeli military technique and if the special reconnaissance forces have chalked up any successes" (Jonathan Lis and Moti Katz, "IDF vets who trained Georgia troops say war with Russia is no surprise," *Haaretz*, 11 August 2008).

Yet on the ground, the Israeli-trained Georgian forces, perhaps unsurprisingly overwhelmed by the Russians, have done little to redeem the image of Israel's military following its defeat by Hizballah's in July-August 2006.

The question remains as to why Israel was involved in the first place. There are several reasons. The first is simply economic opportunism: for years, especially since the 11 September 2001 attacks, arms exports and "security expertise" have been one of Israel's growth industries. But the close Israeli involvement in a region Russia considers to be of vital interest suggests that Israel might have been acting as part of the broader US scheme to encircle Russia and contain its reemerging power.



L'Impero si è fermato a Baghdad, by Valerio Poletti

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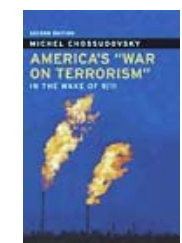
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all'ambiente naturale che siano manifestamente eccessivi rispetto all'insieme dei concreti e diretti i vantaggi militari previsti.

:: Iraq anthem
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Since the end of the Cold War, the US has been steadily encroaching on Russia's borders and expanding NATO in a manner the Kremlin considers highly provocative. Shortly after coming into office, the Bush Administration tore up the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty and, like the Clinton administration, adopted former Soviet satellite states as its own, using them to base an anti-missile system Russia views as a threat. In addition to their "global war on terror," hawks in Washington have recently been talking up a new Cold War with Russia.

Georgia was an eager volunteer in this effort and has learned quickly the correct rhetoric: one Georgian minister claimed that "every bomb that falls on our heads is an attack on democracy, on the European Union and on America." Georgia has been trying to join NATO, and sent 2,000 soldiers to help the US occupy Iraq. It may have hoped that once war started this loyalty would be rewarded with the kind of round-the-clock airlift of weapons that Israel receives from the US during its wars. Instead so far the US only helped airlift the Georgian troops from Iraq back to the beleaguered home front.

By helping Georgia, Israel may have been doing its part to duplicate its own experience in assisting the eastward expansion of the "Euro-Atlantic" empire. While supporting Georgia was certainly risky for Israel, given the possible Russian reaction, it has a compelling reason to intervene in a region that is heavily contested by global powers. Israel must constantly reinvent itself as an "asset" to American power if it is to maintain the US support that ensures its survival as a settler-colonial enclave in the Middle East. It is a familiar role; in the 1970s and 1980s, at the behest of Washington, Israel helped South Africa's apartheid regime fight Soviet-supported insurgencies in South African-occupied Namibia and Angola, and it trained right-wing US-allied death squads fighting left-wing governments and movements in Central America. After 2001, Israel marketed itself as an expert on combating "Islamic terrorism."

Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez recently denounced Colombia - long one of the largest recipients of US military aid after Israel -- as the "Israel of Latin America." Georgia's government, to the detriment of its people, may have tried to play the role of the "Israel of the Caucasus" -- a loyal servant of US ambitions in that region -- and lost the gamble. Playing with empires is dangerous for a small country.

As for Israel itself, with the Bush Doctrine having failed to give birth to the "new Middle East" that the US needs to maintain its power in the region against growing resistance, an ever more desperate and rogue Israel must look for opportunities to prove its worth elsewhere. That is a dangerous and scary thing.

Co-founder of The Electronic Intifada, Ali Abunimah is author of One Country: A Bold Proposal to End the Israeli- Palestinian Impasse (Metropolitan Books, 2006).

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Web**Comment by robertsgt40 - 12 Aug 2008 - 19:17 [USER NOT REGISTERED]**

"Israel, an asset to American power"? Surely you jest. Israel isn't an asset to anyone on the planet. With friends like Israel, who needs enemies?

Comment by escapefrombushistan - 12 Aug 2008 - 21:50 [USER NOT REGISTERED]

"...economic opportunism: for years, especially since the 11 September 2001 attacks, arms exports and "security expertise" have been one of Israel's growth industries."

9/11 CUI BONO?

Comment by naim kassem - 12 Aug 2008 - 22:24 [USER NOT REGISTERED]

Ali Abunimah is obviously trying to be moderate. But in doing so, he commits error.

He writes: "... large numbers of civilians killed and injured, and Russia's fury unabated, ..."

Unabated?

Please check again Ali. The Georgians committed the aggression. The Russians responded.

In other words, Russian "fury" was not "unabated."

Stop trying to play nice little "moderate" Arab guy. Just tell the facts please.

Russia's response was ARGUABLY DISPROPORTIONATE, but it was certainly NOT "unabated."

Comment by michaelm - 13 Aug 2008 - 15:20 [REGISTERED USER]

So, why hadn't the Israelis left Georgia in the days prior to the assault on S.Ossetia? It was because no one amongst the Georgians would have initiated that foolhardy assault knowing that Russia is not to be trifled with. Nor would American led mercenaries have, as by definition a mercenary does not initiate a war but fights at the direction of those to whom he has been assigned to assist.

Who then initiated the assault on the Russian peacekeepers and Ossetian innocents? I would suggest that as Israeli instruction to Georgian troops was completed but they were still `in country` they remained because Israel needed an assault on Russian peacekeepers in S.Ossetia precisely on the eve, not before, not later, of the Beijing Olympics to block China from doing anything about Israel's planned imminent attack on Iran, and leaving Russia differently fully occupied with an intractable problem in Georgia, blocking it from doing anything to assist an Iran under a planned blitzkrieg attack of its nuclear facilities by Israel. That, at least, was the idea.

Israel could only rely on its own nationals `in country` to not vacillate, to initiate as instructed, the assault, but in conjunction, of course, with Georgian troops who had the Minister of Defense's orders to co-operate with the Israeli advisors as they were now going `live`. I should add here that the Georgian Minister of Defense was a Hebrew speaking former Israeli. Is there such a thing as a former Israeli?

It was extremely important for the Israelis to have American led mercenaries to provide the cover that they needed to withdraw from the scene, after initiating the assault, without the Georgian troops realising that they had been had. The

American led mercenaries job was to maintain forward momentum with the Georgian troops, thus providing the Israelis cover to stay behind - and live.

I ask, were there reports of any Israelis killed in this ?

Unfortunately for Israel the Russians figured out the why and the when through listening to unguarded mobile telephone traffic between Israeli advisors in Georgia and family back home in Israel, and were thus ready to roll on cue, and so turning back the assault within 24 hrs.

Because the assault by Georgian and mercenary troops was blunted so quickly and turned back, the Israeli advisors did not have time to return to Israel in any orderly fashion. They were stunned at the rout of their proteges.

There was indeed, I sensed, a mild panic amongst them lest the Russians descend on them all at once. Clearly it was within the easy capacity of the Russians to stop the Israeli advisors return to Israel, but they chose not to press their advantage and El Al Airlines knows that they won't be harmed on landing nor on take off.

Through its stunningly speedy and efficient response, Russia has thwarted Israel's imminent assault on Iran's nuclear facilities and that was a incredible victory

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