

THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF GEORGIA – ITS IMPACT ON ISRAEL AND THE MIDDLE EAST

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Abstract

The heavy-handed policy demonstrated by Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in his invasion of Georgia in August 2008 should have come as no surprise to anyone following Putin's foreign policy in the Middle East in the 2005-2008 period, which has clearly displayed the aggressiveness and anti-Americanism so evident in the invasion of Georgia. Putin's cultivation of the anti-American terrorist organizations Hamas and Hizbollah, and his military and diplomatic support for anti-American "Rogue States" like Syria and Iran, indeed set the stage for the invasion of Georgia as Putin sought to spread Russian influence throughout the South Caucasus as well as the Middle East. The invasion of Georgia, however, had a mixed reaction in the Middle East with Syria trying to exploit the invasion to gain access to increased shipments of Russian arms, Israel seeking to prevent such arms shipments, and Turkey and Iran, with long memories of Czarist and Soviet aggression, reacting coldly to Russian efforts to get their support for the invasion.

Keywords: *Russia, Middle East policy, Georgian war, Syria, Iran, Turkey, Israel.*

Introduction

Russia's invasion of Georgia, which came after a long period of tension between the two countries, can be seen as yet another example of Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's aggressive foreign policy which increasingly became evident following his reelection to the Russian Presidency in 2004. This aggressiveness has not only been evident in his pressure against the newly independent states of the Former Soviet Union - especially the Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia - but also by his cultivation of rogue Middle East states and organizations, such as Syria, Iran, Hamas and Hizbollah. This was in contrast to the policy of his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, who followed a much more defensive foreign policy.

Under Putin economic embargoes were imposed on Moldova and Georgia, and, allegedly because of a dispute over pricing, Russia cut off natural gas exports to Ukraine in the dead of winter. Georgia, however, was a particular thorn in the side of Putin, for several reasons. First, the democratically elected government of Mikheil Saakashvili, which came to power in the

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first of the "colored revolutions" in the former Soviet Union - an example which very much concerned Putin - provides the only transit route to West for Caspian Sea energy that is not under Russian control. Thus Georgia hosts both the Baku(Azerbaijan)-Tbilisi(Georgia)-Ceyhan(Turkey) oil pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline from the Shah Deniz natural gas field in Azerbaijan to the West. This natural gas pipeline could become of far greater importance should a Trans-Caspian natural gas pipeline be constructed, one that could move gas from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan westward by hooking into the natural gas pipeline in Azerbaijan. This is of serious concern to Russia, currently a petro-power, because its own production of oil and natural gas has begun to decline. Consequently, Russia has sought to control Kazakh and Turkmen oil and natural gas production to make up for its own declining production. For this reason Georgia, which has offered itself as a non-Russian route for Kazakh and Turkmen energy exports posed a major challenge for Moscow, and energy politics may well have been one of the causes of the invasion.

Even more of a challenge for Putin was Georgian President Saakhvili's desire to join NATO. Putin, by offering Russian citizenship to people living in Georgia's breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, by moving Russian troops in and out of these regions, and by encouraging the South Ossetians to periodically fire artillery shells at Georgian positions outside of South Ossetia, goaded Saakashvili into a military response against the province, thus providing a pretext for Russian troops to militarily intervene to "protect" Russian citizens living in the breakaway region. Despite a cease-fire negotiated by French President Nicolas Sarkozy, acting in his current capacity as EU President, Russian troops now occupy Abkhazia and South Ossetia and, until early October, occupied significant parts of Georgia, thereby threatening both the regime of Saakashvili and the oil and natural gas pipelines running through Georgia.

This heavy-handed Russian action should not have come as a surprise to anyone following Putin's foreign policy in the Middle East over the last few years, which has also demonstrated the combination of aggressiveness and anti-Americanism so evident in the Russian intervention in Georgia. A brief review of Putin's policy in the Middle East since he was reelected as Russia's President in 2004 will demonstrate his growing aggressiveness.

When Vladimir Putin became Prime Minister in the Fall of 1999 and President of Russia in 2000, a major preoccupation - one that continued during his eight years as Russia's President - was the second war with Chechnya which he had begun as Prime Minister by invading that Caucasian Republic of the Russian Federation in 1999. In addition to seeking to end outside aid to the Chechen rebels, he also moved quickly to improve the coordination of Russian foreign policy and consolidate his domestic power base. Thus he ended the freelancing foreign policy activities of such oil companies as Lukoil whose actions in Azerbaijan had conflicted with Russian policy there, and brought Russian arms sales under the control of one agency, Rosoboronoexport. He also brought the once politically powerful Russian oligarchs under control, forcing Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky into exile and arresting Yukos head Mikhail Khodorkovsky. To ensure that he would not be criticized by the media, he gained control of all of the major Russian TV networks as well as the major newspapers. In addition, he created a ruling political party, United Russia, to control the Duma, so that, unlike the situation during the Yeltsin years when the Duma posed constant challenges to the Russian

President, he would have full support for his policies. Finally, in the face of the challenges of popular revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, he created a youth group, Nashi (Ours), that was a combination of the Komsomol, the old Soviet youth organization, and the Hitler Jugend, to disperse anti-government demonstrations¹.

By 2004, with his domestic political opponents under control, overwhelmingly reelected to a second term as Russia's President, the Russian economy improving, and with oil prices rapidly rising, Putin was ready to move ahead with his three major objectives for Russia: (1) restoring Russia's status as a great power, thereby ending American dominance of the post-Cold War world (2) developing the Russian economy, especially in the high tech area, and (3) further limiting foreign aid to the Chechen rebels who were continuing their struggle against Russia. Unfortunately, for Putin, two events in the September-November 2004 period - the Chechen seizure of the school in Beslan that led to the loss of 332 Russian lives in a bungled rescue operation, and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine which brought to power a Ukrainian president whom Putin had publicly opposed - made both Putin, and Russia, look weak. To counter this image Putin decided to formulate a new strategy for Russia in the Middle East, a region where the United States' position was rapidly weakening due to the growing insurgency in Iraq and the revival of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Seeking to exploit the weakened US position, Putin moved first to court the leading anti-American rogue states and movements in the region - Syria, Iran, Hamas and Hizbollah. Subsequently, he was also to court the leading Sunni powers in the Middle East: Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates.

Putin and the Middle East

Putin's first move was to improve relations with Syria, which was isolated because of its heavy-handed policies in Lebanon. In January 2005, Moscow waived 90% of Syria's debt to the Former Soviet Union, and also sold Damascus surface-to-air missiles, which angered Israel, along with anti-tank missiles, some of which Syria transferred to Hizbollah which used them in its summer 2006 war against Israel. Then, after Syria was accused of involvement in the assassination of former Lebanese President Rafiq Hariri, Moscow did its best to prevent sanctions from being imposed on Syria, something that brought it into conflict with both France and the United States. The next Russian move was to cement relations with Iran, by approving the long-delayed agreement to supply nuclear fuel to the Bushehr reactor. Then, following the decision of the newly elected President of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, to break off talks with the European Union over Iran's nuclear program in August 2005, Moscow did its best to delay even a discussion of sanctions against Iran in the UN Security Council even though Iran refused to provide the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) with information about its nuclear programs. Making matters worse, Ahmadinejad called for "wiping Israel off the map", and denied the existence of the Holocaust. Despite such declarations, in November 2005, Moscow, seeing Iran as its key anti-American ally in the

¹ For an excellent analysis of Putin's domestic policies, see Lilia Shevtsova, "Russia: lost in transition" (Washington, DC: The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2007)

Middle East, signed an agreement with Tehran to provide it with sophisticated short range missiles to protect its nuclear installations against a possible Israeli or American attack².

Then, following the Hamas victory in the Palestine Legislative Council elections in January 2006, Putin called the event "a very serious blow" to American diplomacy in the Middle East. Almost immediately thereafter, noting that Hamas was not on Russia's terrorist list, he invited a Hamas delegation to Moscow, thus breaking the policy line of the Diplomatic Quartet (Russia, the US, the UN and the EU) which had called for isolating Hamas, and giving the terrorist organization a modicum of diplomatic legitimacy³. Six months later, when war broke out between Israel and Hizbollah after the kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers, Russia openly opposed sanctions against Hizbollah's main sponsor, Syria, at a meeting of the G-8 and criticized Israel for its overreaction. In the aftermath of the war, Russia sent a group of engineers to Lebanon to rebuild bridges destroyed in the conflict, but did not offer to troops for the expansion of the UNIFIL contingent in Southern Lebanon, whose mission, at least in theory, was to disarm Hizbollah.

Russia's backing for Syria, Hamas, Hizbollah and Iran, however, soon came into conflict with Putin's goal of moving to improve ties with the Sunni states of the Arab world, especially Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf Arab States, Jordan and Egypt, which were deeply suspicious of Iran and its allies. Consequently, as a sop to the Sunni Arabs, prior to visiting Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Jordan in February 2007, Putin finally agreed to limited UN Security Council sanctions against Iran in December 2006, and, in March 2007, following the trip, Moscow also agreed to a few more limited sanctions. During his visit to the Gulf Arabs, Putin sought major investments in Russia's banking and space industries, weapons sales and joint investment projects in oil and natural gas. During the spring and summer of 2007, as part of Putin's plan to court the Sunni Arabs, Russia also conspicuously delayed sending the promised nuclear fuel to Iran, making the dubious claim that the oil-rich Persian Gulf country had not made the necessary payments. Following the ill-conceived United States National Intelligence Estimate on Iran of December 2007, however, which erroneously argued that Iran had given up its nuclear weapons program, and hence was not an immediate threat; Moscow perceived diminished pressure from both the Gulf Arabs and the United States, and went ahead with the sale of the nuclear fuel. The shipments had been completed by February 2008. Ironically, even as Moscow was helping Iran develop its nuclear capability, Putin was offering to build nuclear reactors for the Gulf Arabs and Egypt as well, as the Arab states sought to keep up with their rival, Iran⁴.

²For a detailed analysis of Russian-Iranian relations from 1991-2006, see Robert O. Freedman, "Russia, Iran and the nuclear question: the Putin record" (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Strategic Studies Institute of the US Army War College, 2006)

³ See Freedman, Robert O., "Can Russia Be a Partner for the United States in the Middle East?", in Aurel Braun (ed.) "NATO-American relations" (New York: Routledge, 2008), p.129

⁴ See Robert O. Freedman, "The Putin Visit to Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Jordan: Business promotion or Great Power Maneuvering" in: *Johnson's Russia List*, No. 15, 15.02.2007 (available at <http://www.cdi.org/russia/johnson/2007-39-39.cfm>)

Thus, at the time of the Russian invasion of Georgia, Russia was following a policy of encouraging the main anti-American forces in the Middle East - Hamas, Hizbollah, Syria and Iran - while at the same time trying to cultivate the major Sunni Arab states of the Middle East, and seeking to draw them away from their alignment with the United States. The invasion of Georgia, coming as it has in the midst of the Russian diplomatic offensive in the Middle East, is likely to have the most impact on Russia's relations with Syria, Israel, Turkey and Iran.

Syria

In an almost classic case of political opportunism, Syrian President Bashar Assad seized upon the Russian invasion of Georgia - and the fact that Israel (along with Germany, France, the United States and Turkey), had provided military equipment and training to the Georgian military - to try to convince the Russians to sell Syria the weapons they had long wanted and that the Russians had so far proved unwilling to sell them, especially the short range, solid fuel range Iskander-E ground-to-ground missile that could reach virtually every target in Israel and the SAM 300 anti-aircraft missile system, which if installed in Syria near Damascus, could control most of Israel's airspace. As Assad told the Russian newspaper *Kommersant*, on the eve of his visit to Moscow when Georgian-Russian hostilities were still going on: "I think that in Russia and in the world, everyone is now aware of Israel's role and its military consultants in the Georgia crisis. And if before in Russia there were people who thought these (Israeli) forces can be friendly, now I think no one thinks that way"⁵. It is clear that Assad was referring to Putin who on repeated occasions stated that he had denied the Iskander missiles to Syria, because they could harm Israel.

In backing the Russian intervention in Georgia - one of the few countries in the world to do so - Assad was repeating the policy of his father Hafiz Assad whose Syrian regime was one of the few in the world to support the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. While Assad senior was richly rewarded with Soviet military equipment for his support of Soviet policy in Afghanistan, it remains to be seen what Bashar Assad will get. All Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov would say after the Assad visit was that Moscow would "consider" Syria's appeal for new weapons sales, and that in any case Russia would not sell any weapons that would affect the Middle East strategic balance⁶. Since sale of both the Iskander-E and SAM-300 systems would definitely affect the regional military balance, Syria is unlikely to get these weapons; that is, if Lavrov is telling the truth or he is not overruled by his superiors. What may come out of the visit are the sale of short-range anti-aircraft missiles, perhaps to make it more difficult for Israel to conduct raids on suspected Syrian nuclear installations as it did in September 2007, the sale of additional anti-tank missiles, such as the ones Hizbollah used effectively against Israel in their 2006 war, and a more robust agreement between

⁵ Zygari, Mikhail, "Interview with Syrian President Al-Asad", *Kommersant*, August 20, 2008 (translated in the Foreign Broadcast Information Service Daily Report [Hereafter FBIS] the Middle East and South Asia [Hereafter MESA], August 21, 2008)

⁶ Cited in VESTI TV, "'Russian Foreign Minister on Syrian Ties, NATO and Georgia" [FBIS: RUSSIA 22 August 2008]

Russia and Syria for the Russian use of the Syrian port of Tartus for the expanding Russian Navy⁷.

Israel

Russian-Israeli relations have had their ups and downs under Putin, but in recent years it is clear that relations have deteriorated. Russian support for Hamas, its turning a blind eye to Syrian transfers of anti-tank missiles to Hizbollah, and its military and diplomatic support for Iran at a time when the Iranian leadership has been calling for the destruction of Israel, have all soured relations. Yet, as a high ranking Israeli diplomat who specializes in Russian-Israeli relations told me in 2007, "Relations are not as bad as they could be"⁸. Indeed, Moscow has a bifurcated, if not schizophrenic relationship with Israel. While on the one hand Russian regional policies vis-à-vis Hamas, Hizbollah, Iran and Syria, have clearly hurt Israel; on the level of bilateral Russian-Israeli relations, the ties between the two countries are developing surprisingly well. Thus, on the eve of the Assad visit to Moscow, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert had a telephone conversation about Israeli-Syrian relations and about the situation in Georgia; trade between Russia and Israel has exceeded two and a half billion dollars a year, much of it in the high-tech sector which Putin needs to develop the Russian economy so that it is not dependent on dwindling energy exports; cultural ties are thriving, and Moscow has recently established a cultural center in Tel Aviv⁹; the two countries have signed a visa-waiver agreement to facilitate tourism; negotiations are underway for the return to Russia of Czarist property in Jerusalem; Russia and Israel cooperate in the sale of weaponry to third countries, such as an AWACS aircraft to India (Russia supplies the airframe and Israel the avionics) and Israel's ruling Kadima Party has recently signed an agreement with Putin's United Russia Party to establish party-to-party relations¹⁰. While some in the Russian military such as Russia's Deputy Chief of Staff, Anatoly Nogovitsyn publicly complained about Israeli aid to the Georgian military¹¹, Foreign Minister Lavrov went out of his way to praise Israel for stopping arms sales to Georgia¹².

What then explains Russia's bifurcated policy toward Israel, and how will the Russian invasion of Georgia affect it? It appears clear that Russia has three goals vis-à-vis Israel. First, it is the homeland of more than a million Russian-speaking citizens of the Former Soviet Union, and Russia sees Russian speakers abroad as a source of its world influence. Hence the emphasis on cultural ties between Russia and Israel, in which Israelis of Russian origin play the dominant role. Second, as noted above, Putin is determined to develop the

⁷ According to a report in RIA-Novosti, Russia sailors are already expanding the port of Tartus by rebuilding floating causeways that can be used by Russian ships (RIA Novosti, "Russian Navy Personnel Rebuild Floating Causeway at Syrian Port", 9 September 2008 [FBIS: RUSSIA 10 September 2008])

⁸ Interview, Israeli Foreign Ministry, 14 June 2007

⁹ Cited in: Anshel Pfeffer, "Out of the Shadows", *Haaretz* (online), 16 August 2008

¹⁰ Galili, Lili, "Russian PM to Open Party Branch in Israel", *Haaretz* (online), 21 August 2008

¹¹ Cited in: "Russia Accuses Israel of Selling Arms to Georgia", *Jerusalem Post*, 20 August 2008

¹² ITAR-TASS, "Russian FM Lavrov Praises Israeli Decision to Refrain From Assisting Georgia", 19 August 2008 [FBIS: RUSSIA 20 August 2008]

Russian economy, and high-tech trade with Israel is a part of his plan. Third, the Arab-Israeli conflict is a major issue in world politics, and Putin would very much like to play a role in its diplomacy, if not in finding a solution to the conflict. For this reason he has called for an international peace conference in Moscow in November 2008 and he would like Israel to attend, so as to build up the role of Russia as a world mediator.

Turkey

In the case of Turkey, the Russian invasion of Georgia will awaken past memories of Czarist and Soviet military pressure against both the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic. The Ottoman Empire fought a dozen wars with Czarist Russia, losing the northern shore of the Black Sea, the Crimean Peninsula, and extensive territory in the Balkans. While relations improved after the collapse of both the Ottoman Empire and Czarist Russia, relations chilled again at the end of World War Two, when the Soviet Union exerted pressure on Turkey to grant Moscow bases in the Turkish Straits - a demand that drove Turkey into the arms of the United States and NATO.

Relations improved between the USSR and Turkey in the 1980s as the two countries signed a natural gas agreement, and by the time of the Russian invasion of Georgia, Russia had become Turkey's number one trading partner, with trade exceeding \$25 billion per year, and Turkey now dependent on Russia for more than 60% of its natural gas imports. On the other hand, Turkey had been a major ally of Georgia, and along with Germany, France, Israel and the United States, had cooperated militarily with Georgia. In addition, Turkey's hopes of being a major energy hub rest not only on plans to trans-ship Russian and Iranian natural gas, but also on the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and on the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum natural gas pipeline, both of which, as noted above, cross Georgian territory. In addition, the Turkish leadership will not be pleased over the precedent set by South Ossetian and Abkhaz independence, given the demands of Turkey's Kurdish minority for independence.

Torn by these conflicting pressures, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan sought to mediate the Russian-Georgian conflict by proposing a "Caucasus Cooperation and Stability Alliance", composed of Turkey, Russia, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan¹³. However, given the fact that Georgia and Russia are still actively hostile to each other, and Armenia and Azerbaijan remain near war over the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh - although Turkey and Armenia have begun to improve relations - the Turkish president's proposal seems little more than an attempt to prevent the Georgian-Russian relationship from deteriorating further, a development that would pose significant problems of choice for Turkey. Nonetheless, the Russian move into Georgia may, in the long run, prompt a rethinking of policy in Ankara, something that could reverse the deterioration of Turkish-American relations which was caused by the 2003 Iraq war - especially since Russia demonstrated its displeasure with Turkish policy on the Georgian question by imposing a

¹³ See Fulya Ozerrkan and Mustafa Oguz, "Caucasian Table setting for Five", *Turkish Daily News* (online), 22 August 2008

blockade on Turkish exports to Russia, which reportedly cost the Turks up to a billion dollars¹⁴.

Iran

In the short run at least, the Russian invasion of Georgia, with its accompanying diplomatic clash between the United States and Russia, may well work to the benefit of Iran. Any chance of Russia agreeing to further UN Security Council sanctions against Iran seem to have gone by the wayside, although given the very limited sanctions which the Russians had agreed to in the past, this is probably not too important a factor. Indeed, following a damning indictment of Iran by the International Atomic Energy Agency in mid-September, all Russia would agree to was a weakly-worded resolution against Iran, but not to additional sanctions¹⁵. In addition, Russia may now be more willing to sell Iran the SAM-300 missiles the Iranians have long wanted. On the other hand, with sanctions no longer being seriously considered, the chances of an Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear installations are enhanced.

In the longer term, however, the Iranians may share some of the concerns of Turkey. Iran, like Turkey, has suffered Russian invasions in the past and the cautious Iranian response to the Russian invasion of Georgia may reflect that concern. In addition, Iran, like Turkey, has restive minorities, and the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia could set a negative precedent for Iran. Perhaps for this reason the Iranian semi-official Fars News Agency ran a story citing the Georgian Ambassador to Iran who praised Iran for its position in the Russian - Georgian conflict¹⁶.

Conclusion

The Russian invasion of Georgia was the culmination of an increasingly aggressive foreign policy on the part of Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in the Middle East and elsewhere. While Syria quickly supported Moscow, most of the rest of the Middle East, including Russia's ally Iran, withheld support, calling only for a quick cease-fire. While there has been a good bit of speculation that the invasion will lead to an improvement of American-European relations in the face of the new Russian threat, despite Europe's reliance on energy imports from Russia, the American position in the Middle East could also improve as a result of the heavy-handed Russian policy in Georgia, although that improvement may have to wait until a new American administration takes office in January 2009.

¹⁴ Anatolian News Agency, "Turkey Estimates Cost of Russian Trade Dispute 1 Billion by End of September", 14 September 2008 [FBIS: RUSSIA 15 September 2008]

¹⁵ Blitz, James, "Russia Joins UN Move to Condemn Iran", *Financial Times*, 27 September 2008, and Lynch, Colum, "Security Council Pressed on Iran", *Washington Post*, 27 September 2008

¹⁶ FARS News Agency, "Georgia Praises Iran's Stance on Caucasus Conflict", 23 August 2008 [FBIS:MESA 25 August 2008]