

THE OTHER 6-DAY WAR By Si Frumkin

The most recent 6-Day War – the brief Russia-Georgia war – did not directly affect Israel. It did, however, involve a complex and secret web of international relationships with Israel as an important player and participant.

The primary participants were, of course, Russians and Georgians. America was an important bystander, supporting Georgia politically and economically while avoiding direct military intercession. Prior to the war, both America and Israel had teams of military advisers in Georgia and were supplying military hardware to it, but compared to America's, Israel's influence and interests were minuscule.

Probably the best analysis of Israel's interest in Georgia – a geographically distant and seemingly unimportant area - has been published by Stratfor, one of the more authoritative intelligence information websites (www.stratfor.com).

A cornerstone of Israeli foreign policy is to resist the resumption of great power diplomatic competition in Middle East that would result in the arming and empowering of Israel's enemies. Currently, Israel is not in immediate existential danger from the divided and ineffective Palestinians nor from the overwhelming majority of the potentially hostile states in its vicinity. Most of them are not in a position, nor have a desire, to engage in anything more threatening than rhetoric. Egypt, which is in a state of "cold peace" with Israel, is facing its own internal problems from radical Islamists; it is reluctant to encourage and meaningfully support terrorist groups like Hamas that would increase this threat. In addition, Egypt, and the other two potential enemies, Iran and Syria are quite unable to act against Israel directly without an outside patron that could provide the arms and support that disappeared with the end of the Cold War.

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union was the great Arab patron, motivated by a policy to control the Middle East that, in addition to being in possession of the Middle Eastern oil fields, would put it in a position to pressure Turkey for free

passage through the Dardanelles, thus gaining access to the Mediterranean, and influencing the future of Europe.

Soviet policy created a number of Soviet quasi-satellites within the Arab states and was the trigger for continuing terror and three major wars any one of which could have ended in Israel's total annihilation. The U.S. supported Israel as a counterweight to the Soviets. This relationship continued after the fall of the Soviet Union but it has diminished in importance – American aid to Israel, with the growth of Israel's economy, dropped from 20% of the Israeli GDP in 1974 to 2% today. It should be noted that a similar situation exists in the formerly Soviet Caucasus republics: Georgia is supported by the U.S., while neighboring Armenia is in the Soviet sphere of influence – and there is a constant pressure for by both camps on formerly Soviet Ukraine, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

Israel is currently facing two major potential threats: nuclear Iran and the re-emergence of a major power that would enable and strengthen, openly or by subterfuge, the regional threat to Israel. Russia is the only power that fits – and apparently desires – to play that role.

Israel is worried that Russia will once again challenge America's influence in the Middle East by conspiring against the tired Mubarak regime and providing sophisticated weaponry to a sympathetic fundamentalist government that would be a real threat to Israel. It worries that Syria would be re-armed and be in a position to transfer the weapons and trained troops to fight America in Iraq and Afghanistan, and Israel in the territories. There is also the possibility of a takeover of Persian Gulf states – Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the Emirates by rebels trained in Iran and Syria with Russian support.

Under the circumstances, Israel has apparently decided to avoid anything that might annoy the Russians. Israel stopped selling arms to Georgia several weeks before the war began, as soon as it got the word of the upcoming Russian attack. It didn't join the U.S. in criticizing and blaming Russia but sought to placate and reassure it. On October 7, Israeli P.M., Yehud Olmert, visited

Moscow to restore Russia's confidence of Israel's goodwill and to express Israel's concern with the ongoing sale of arms by Russia to Syria and Iran. The Soviet response that the arms sold were strictly for defense did not carry much weight since they included the most sophisticated anti-aircraft and anti-tank missiles which had already been used by Hezbollah in Lebanon. In addition, according to the authoritative Jane Defense Weekly, some of these missile systems have already been sold by Syria to Iran less than a month ago.

In order to appease Russia, Olmert brought an additional present: a gift of the Russian Sergei compound in Jerusalem – a church, a school and a courtyard – 90% of which Israel bought from the Soviet Union in 1964 for \$3.5 million in oranges. It's possible that some of these Haifa oranges were enjoyed by teenage Putin and Medvedev 44 years ago but I doubt that anyone would want to rely on the permanence of peace built on grand gestures, symbolic gifts and orange peels.

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