

CNSNews.com

## Israel Wants to Avoid Taking Sides in Georgia-Russia Conflict

Monday, August 11, 2008

By Julie Stahl

**Jerusalem (CNSNews.com)** – Israel recently scaled back its weapons sales to Georgia out of concern that Russia would retaliate by selling more advanced weapons to Syria and Iran, reports said on Monday.

Although the U.S. and France are said to be Georgia's largest arms suppliers, the Israeli Ministry of Defense reportedly has sold some \$300-\$500 million in weapons and military training to Georgia over the past ten years.

According to the Jerusalem Post, Israel rejected frequent requests from Georgia to buy weapons in the months leading up to the conflict that erupted last week. The newspaper also said Georgia wanted to buy missiles from Israel but it didn't happen.

A defense official quoted by the Jerusalem Post said Israel, recognizing the Georgia and Russia were "on a collision course," decided to scale back weapons sales to Georgia so it wouldn't appear that Israel was backing either country in the conflict.

On Monday, state-run radio reported that Israel would not halt arms sales to Georgia but would limit and closely supervise them.

Russia's supply of weapons to Syria and Iran has been a source of tension between Israel and Russia for years.

Several years ago, Russia supplied Syria with advanced missiles and is considering selling an advanced anti-aircraft missile system to Iran, which could be used to guard nuclear sites against any Israeli strikes.

The Soviet Union, until its collapse, armed many Arab states while the U.S. backed Israel and a few other regional players. Russia and Israel have diplomatic ties. But in recent years, Russia has been trying to reassert itself in the Middle East by once again arming countries like Syria and Iran.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Aryeh Mekel would not comment on Israeli weapons sales to Georgia or on what concerns Israel might have about Russia. Reports about Israel fearing Russian retaliation for Israeli weapons sales is "pure speculation," he said.

Israel is not involved in the conflict at all, Mekel said on Monday. "The two countries are friendly to Israel, both Russia and Georgia." But, he said, the war between them is "not our problem."

The Foreign Ministry issued a statement over the weekend saying that Israel was following the developments in South Ossetia and Abkhazia with "great concern."

"Israel recognizes the territorial integrity of Georgia and calls for a peaceful solution," the statement said.

Yiftach Shapir, director of the military balance project at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv, said as far as Russia is concerned, Israel's weapons sales to Georgia are "totally insignificant."

Nevertheless, Shapir told **CNSNews.com**, Russia does not want Israel to sell weapons or training to the Georgians.

But Georgia has been very eager for Israeli help.

Former Israeli Ambassador to Georgia Shabtai Zur told the Israeli Web site YNET that Georgian government officials had told him that they wanted “to model their army” after the Israeli army.

At least two Israeli security companies have recently been in Georgia, training the army. there.

One Israeli reservist who was involved in the training was quoted by the Israeli daily Ha’aretz as saying that they had taught the Georgian soldiers “very basic” training in counter-terrorism and house-to-house fighting.

“We are in a tough situation because Georgia did see us as an ally. But we really do need to keep good relations with Russia,” Shapir said.

Zvi Magen, a former Israeli envoy to Ukraine and Russia, noted that Israel could have sold far more weapons than it did to Georgia.

“We lowered our profile [in Georgia], and the Russians have also taken us into consideration and did not sell everything they could have to our neighbors,” Magen was quoted as saying in Monday’s Jerusalem Post.

Meanwhile, the Jewish Agency for Israel – the quasi-governmental organization that is in charge of immigration to Israel – said it has assisted some 200 Jews living near the town of Gori along the South Ossetian border to evacuate to the Georgian capital, Tbilisi, since the fighting began.

Most of the Georgia’s 12,000 Jews live in the area of Tbilisi.

The Jewish Agency also set up a special hotline for Georgian Jews living in Israel to request information about their relatives living in Georgia.

All original CNSNews.com material, copyright 1998-2008 Cybercast News Service.