

Paying the Blood Price: Reflections from Georgian Veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan

Executive Summary

**Maia A. Earl
William & Mary '22**

**Daniel Maliniak
William & Mary
Associate Professor
Government Department**

Introduction and Background

It would likely come as a surprise to most Americans to learn that Georgia, a small country in the Caucasus Mountains with a population of about four million, sent its armed forces abroad to serve alongside U.S. and NATO troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. Not only did Georgian forces participate in these international missions, but they did so without national caveats,¹ risking (and sacrificing) their lives in the most dangerous and austere region of Afghanistan, Helmand Province. Georgia was the largest per-capita contributor of troops in Afghanistan and maintained its presence in-country from 2010 until the U.S. withdrawal in August 2021. All of this was done without an explicit obligation, as Georgia is not a NATO member responding to Article 5 or a country with alliance commitments to the U.S. or other Western nations.

Given the associated risks and costs, what were Georgia's motivations for investing so heavily in these missions? What was to be gained for Georgia? As our research affirms, the reasons lie in Georgia's long-standing interest in NATO membership and in establishing strong ties with Western nations that would help ensure its national sovereignty and territorial integrity. Georgia showed interest in cooperating with Western partners during the 1990s under President Eduard Shevardnadze,² but efforts did not gain significant traction until direct cooperation with the U.S. military began in the early 2000s.

¹ Some NATO countries agreed to deploy military units to Afghanistan with certain conditions (caveats); for example, that their troops would not participate in combat operations, night-time operations, or that they would not leave the base.

² Georgia joined NATO's Partnership for Peace program in 1994. Select Georgian military officers began training in the U.S. through the International Military Education and Training program. Despite these developments, Georgia's weak state institutions, internal conflicts in the breakaway regions, and failure to democratize following the fall of the Soviet Union precluded the development of a strategic partnership with the U.S. For a contemporary U.S. assessment of Georgia's status, see Gallis (1995).

Georgia's security cooperation with the U.S. coincided with and reflected the nation's larger aspirations to integrate with the West. In 2002, Georgia declared its goal of gaining accession to NATO. In the same year, when the U.S. launched the Georgia Train and Equip Program (GTEP), Georgia took a big step in developing a modern, professional military – one that was modeled largely after U.S. military doctrine. The Georgian Defense Forces (GDF) cooperated with the U.S. military first in securing the Pankisi Gorge,³ and then in Operation Iraqi Freedom from 2004 to 2008, while military training and education programs in Georgia continued to develop and expand.

Then, in 2008, several months after Georgia and Ukraine were denied a Membership Action Plan (MAP) but promised future membership at the NATO Summit in Bucharest, a five-day war between Russia and Georgia broke out, resulting in Russia's military occupation of Georgia's breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Despite this blow to Georgia's territorial integrity and the moral blow of the Bucharest summit, the Georgian Ministry of Defense continued to pursue cooperation with Western partners. The GDF first deployed to Afghanistan in 2010 and continued to do so until 2021 in support of NATO's International Security Assistance Force and Resolute Support Mission, participating in the full spectrum of operations, from counter-insurgency patrols to building schools for Afghan children.

Discussions of these larger national and international issues do not address the personal motivations and experiences of those most directly affected by Georgia's involvement. Given the associated risks and costs, what were Georgian soldiers' motivations for investing so heavily in these missions? What was to be gained for Georgian soldiers? Our research helps shed light on these questions.

The importance of this research at this moment is underpinned by four factors. First, we are over one year out from the U.S. and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan, an important focal point for U.S.-Georgian military cooperation over the past decade. Second, with 20 to 25 percent of Georgia's sovereign territory occupied by Russia and Russian-backed separatists, Georgians are watching the Russian imperial invasion of Ukraine closely, and thinking about their own defense capabilities.⁴ Third, in light of the geopolitical situation and the agreement on a five-year bilateral security cooperation initiative, the Georgia Defense and Deterrence Enhancement Initiative, it is an ideal time to look back at how soldiers view and understand their experiences with previous U.S. cooperation. Finally, like the U.S., Georgia is facing issues meeting military recruitment and retention goals. Understanding the views of veterans may shed light on the

³ The Pankisi Gorge is a region on Georgia's northern border with Russia that, in the early 2000s, was believed to be a safe haven for terrorist organizations including Al Qaeda. Through GTEP, the U.S. trained a Georgian special operations unit to assist in anti-terrorism operations in the Pankisi Gorge.

⁴ Some Georgian veterans have been fighting in Ukraine against the Russian invasion as members of one of the more well-known groups of foreign fighters, the Georgian Legion, and in the International Legion of Territorial Defense of Ukraine. Some of these veterans have experience fighting alongside coalition troops in Iraq and Afghanistan and received U.S. training.

challenges the Georgian Defense Forces face in sustaining a ready, efficient, and capable force to defend Georgia against external threats into the future.

Through our field research, we sought to understand Georgia's reasons for participating in the Iraq and Afghanistan missions through the eyes of Georgian veterans with firsthand experience in these conflicts.⁵ We wanted to understand both what motivated Georgian soldiers, personally, to volunteer to deploy and what these veterans believed were Georgia's broader interests in participating. We also inquired about their experiences working with U.S. and NATO troops (whether on deployments or in training) and their thoughts on Georgia's accession to NATO and relations with the West.

Methodology

While our team set out to interview Georgian veterans, the contacts we made in-country led us to interview both active-duty soldiers and veterans. We conducted most of our interviews face-to-face and in public places, but occasionally we met at private residences or connected through virtual means. Our sample of 23 subjects included both officers and enlisted personnel of various ranks but ultimately leaned heavily toward senior-level officers (both active and veteran). Of our 23 subjects, 18 fell into what we categorized as senior-level soldiers, and 5 were considered junior-level.⁶ All personal information was kept confidential and participation in the research was entirely voluntary and uncompensated. The team contacted additional interviewees outside the military to provide context, including current and former members of the Georgian government bureaucracy.

Five Key Takeaways:

1. Willingness to participate in the research: Once initial contact was made, nearly all participants, both active duty soldiers and veterans alike, were willing and often eager to participate in the research. Some expressed hope that their participation might ultimately help Georgia in some way.

2. Pride in Georgia's performance: When discussing Georgia's participation in international missions, a common sentiment shared among nearly all respondents was a sense of pride in Georgia's military performance, especially in Afghanistan. They often stated that Georgian soldiers' demonstration of bravery had earned the respect of NATO countries' military leaders. In addition to the bravery and reliability of the GDF, two respondents mentioned cultural

⁵ The team was lead by Associate Professor Daniel Maliniak and included Maia Earl '22, Daniella Marx '24, Abby Stern '24, Chuck Williamson '21, M.B.A. '23, Katrine Westgaard '23, Aliia Woodworth '23.

⁶ For the purposes of our research, the senior category includes soldiers and veterans ranked O-4 and above or E-7 and above, and the junior category includes those ranked O-3 and below and E-6 and below. The actual Georgian military rank structure, like that of the U.S. military, is broken into three tiers (junior-, mid-, and senior-level ranks).

awareness as a unique skill that Georgians brought to the NATO missions in Afghanistan, which was sometimes lacking in their American counterparts.

3. Reasons for participating in international missions: On the question of why the Georgian Defense Forces served in Iraq and Afghanistan, we found there to be three primary motivations. On the level of the individual, and particularly for the junior-level soldiers, a large motivating factor was their need to support their families economically. Deploying in support of these international missions was one way for soldiers to increase their income and thus support their loved ones. This motivator often overlapped with one or two other goals which reflected Georgia's broader interests: to gain professional military experience and to further Georgia's integration with the West. Deploying, especially to Afghanistan where the GDF participated in full-spectrum operations, presented an unparalleled opportunity to gain professional experience in combat and counter-insurgency operations. It was an opportunity to work side-by-side with American and NATO troops and to put theory into practice, solidifying and expanding what they had learned in training. At the same time, it was an opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to the U.S. and to NATO—to what they see as their Western family and its democratic ideals. They wanted to show the West that Georgia was a reliable partner, which would in turn obligate Western partners to assist or protect Georgia in a time of need. As one veteran put it, “the idea was that we would contribute – pay the blood price – in Afghanistan for American protection.”

4. Experiences and impacts of working with U.S. and NATO militaries: Georgian soldiers who had direct experience working with the U.S. military, whether through training, educational programs, or deployments, reported these experiences as having a positive impact on their professional development. While the international education and training programs proved beneficial, their experiences on deployments appeared to have the greatest overall impact. Several respondents described a profound shift in their mindset as a result of their experiences working alongside U.S. and NATO troops abroad which inspired them to work toward institutional changes within the GDF.⁷ In terms of tactical skills acquired, the GDF performed security and checkpoint operations in Iraq, while in Afghanistan, they developed what they felt were more valuable skills in small-unit tactics and counter-insurgency operations. Moreover, the performance of the GDF in both Iraq and Afghanistan and their close cooperation with U.S. troops established a reputation of bravery and reliability for the GDF and increased Georgia's presence on the international stage.⁸

5. Views on NATO membership and relations with the West: Responses varied with regard to Georgia's potential accession to NATO. Most respondents had tempered their expectations as a result of many years having passed without an indication from NATO that Georgia is any closer to obtaining membership, despite evident progress toward NATO's stated criteria. Some attitudes

⁷ These changes included the implementation of Mission Command (a strategy of decentralized military command and control) and meritocratic promotion and selection processes.

⁸ Several soldiers and veterans described American and Georgian troops in Afghanistan as being brothers-in-arms or as one family.

bordered on cynicism, with respondents reflecting that they worried Georgia has been forgotten by its Western partners or that Western countries are willing to support Georgia in words but not in action. Nevertheless, most respondents saw the benefit of pursuing interoperability with NATO, regardless of whether it resulted in membership in the alliance, often acknowledging that the issue is part of a broader geostrategic dilemma. With regards to Georgia's readiness for membership, some believed Georgia is (and has been) ready and interoperable, and that its accession depends on NATO countries; others discerned that Georgia is ready militarily but not politically, while still others believed that Georgia and the Ministry of Defense have work to do.

In general, respondents favored cultivating relations with the West. Several respondents mentioned that the language of NATO interoperability and Euro-Atlantic integration is written in the Georgian constitution to ensure that the priorities of state institutions align with achieving these goals.

Conclusion

The results of our research suggest that the Georgian Defense Forces gained much of what they had envisioned when they deployed in support of U.S. and NATO missions, especially in Afghanistan. Soldiers received increased salaries, gained valuable experience working alongside U.S. and NATO member troops, and their participation resulted in a heightened international presence for Georgia. However, NATO membership, and even a Membership Action Plan, have eluded Georgia, and Georgian soldiers who were once hopeful about this prospect have adjusted their expectations over the years. Some expressed disillusionment with the promises of support to Georgia or of eventual NATO membership that seem to lack substance. Nevertheless, there is a continued desire among the GDF soldiers and veterans to partner with the U.S. and to work toward NATO interoperability for the benefits this progression brings to the GDF and to Georgia at large. Moreover, in spite of their recognition of a lack of concrete commitments by the U.S., many veterans we interviewed expressed a deep appreciation for how their experiences with the U.S. military positively impacted their careers, world views, and even how they interacted with their fellow soldiers. The barriers to NATO membership, as well as the goals of ongoing U.S.-Georgian security cooperation and the challenges that the GDF face are subjects that warrant further research.

References:

Gallis, Paul E. (1995). *NATO Enlargement: Partnership for Peace Members – On the Road to Alliance Membership?* (CRS Report No. 95-468 F; Mar. 24, 1995).