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One year later: the Russian-Georgian war

August 7th, 2009 marked the one-year anniversary of the small war between Russia and Georgia. The increasing conflict over South Ossetia and the Black Sea region of Abkhazia escalated into a five-day war with over 550 deaths from both sides. Many people are still left displaced and homeless.

South Ossetia and Abkhazia had overthrown Georgian rule in the 1990s, but Georgia had continued to rule the Georgian-populated areas of the regions. Problems increased when Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, who came into power in 2003, promised to bring Georgia into NATO and restore control over both regions.

The war officially started when Georgia started shelling the South Ossetian rebel capital of Tskhinvali. Russia reacted by sending its troops to South Ossetia to pledge their protection and by declaring them independent states due to their “pro-Moscow” views. President Saakashvili, however, stays firm in his claim that Georgia started shelling in defense against the Russian offensive.

The West condemned the actions of both Russia and Georgia, but condemned them for different reasons. Russia was put at fault for trying to strengthen its control over South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and for engaging in a war that was “disproportionate.” They were also criticized for sending troops into Georgia and for unilaterally recognizing South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states. Georgia, on the other hand, was accused of failing to control those regions and for the indiscriminate shelling of Tskhinvali. As well, their decision to retaliate against Russia’s advances has been highly regarded as irresponsible and preventable. This has affected Georgia’s consideration for NATO membership.

Yet, even a year after the conflict first erupted, nothing has been resolved. Both countries are still blaming each other for the damages that the war caused, and South Ossetia is still under the protection of Russia after it separated from Georgia. The Georgians and South Ossetians even claim that they will never be able to live in peace again.

Despite the ongoing tensions still present between Russia and Georgia, it is assumed that another war is highly unlikely. Russia claims that Georgia is too weak to engage in another war; the one last year took a toll on its military and financial capacity, and

Georgia claims that Russia is afraid of undermining their image and influence amongst neighbours and those from the West. Russia has also been accused by Georgia for planning the invasion as punishment for being pro-Western and wanting to join NATO.

As Georgia continues to seek membership in NATO, it has been said that Russia has been eyeing other troubled areas of the country. Russia has even admitted that the war has allowed them to permanently redraw the map of the Caucasus. It was only earlier this month (just before the one-year anniversary of the conflict) that Russian troops tried to alter the border separating South Ossetia and Georgia. These continuous provocations from Russia have led to most of the international community's siding with Georgia.

Live links to articles: [Facts about the 2008 war in Georgia](#), [North Caucasus: At a glance](#), [Clouds still hang over Georgia](#), [Russian Troops Try to Shift South Ossetia Border Markers](#), [A Year After Russia-Georgia War – A New Reality](#), [But Old Relations](#), [A Year After Georgian War](#), [Refugees Still Coping with Losses](#), [Year After Georgian War, Rage Has Only Hardened](#), [Georgia, Russia Step Back From Fears of a New War](#), [Georgia War Changed Map For Good – Russia's Medvedev](#), [Tributes, accusation mark Georgia war anniversary](#), [Georgia, Russia blame each other for war year ago](#)

Afghan Elections: Meet the Candidates

On August 20th, 2009, Afghanistan will hold its second-ever Presidential elections. With 41 candidates, including current President Hamid Karzai, these elections will prove decisive in paving a way forward for a country wrought by violence and in need of decisive and competent leadership. Who are the main candidates and what do they offer Afghanistan?

Hamid Karzai, the incumbent president, has been in power since being interim-Afghan leader in 2001, and then becoming the first popularly elected president in 2004. His reputation as a loyal Afghan with the ability to forge reconciliations and promote Afghan development contributed to his win. Throughout his presidency, Karzai benefited from a close relationship with the Bush Administration, which consequently garnered accusations that he was an American puppet, but simultaneously gave him access to American resources. But failing to stop rampant government corruption, bringing known drug lords into his political circle and exhibiting greater paranoia about foreign troops on Afghan soil are behind his colder relations with the Obama Administration. Despite administration officials saying that the US remains “actively impartial” to the election, the Obama administration has indirectly shown its preference for some of Karzai's rivals, evident when U.S. Ambassador, to Afghanistan Karl Eikenberry appeared at a press conference with Karzai's two main rivals. This appearance gave impetus to the campaigns of these lesser known Afghan officials who are now proving to be significant contenders in the upcoming election. Despite this, Karzai remains the most likely winner, although a run-off is expected if any of the candidates fails to secure 50% of the vote in the first round. Latest US-funded polling shows Karzai in the lead with 44% of the vote. The first of Karzai's chief rivals is Ashraf Ghani, Karzai's finance minister from 2002-2004.

Ghani, who was educated in the West and worked with the World Bank, is particularly outspoken about the abuses of the Karzai government, arguing that there is no future for normal Afghans in a country run by drug lords. His main platform outlines concrete steps on how he would end poverty and instability within 10 years. He further challenges Afghan's to think beyond the status quo and trust him to end the corruption which forced him to resign his post in 2004. Educated in the West and having worked

for the World Bank, Ghani oversaw the rebuilding of Afghanistan, creating a centralized revenue collection scheme and managing international aid revenue. His main shortcomings are seen as his curt manner and his nearly 24 years spent outside of Afghanistan, garnering him the scrutiny and suspicion befitting a foreign “technocrat” there to impose policy on Afghans. Nonetheless, as a Pashtun and independent candidate (like Karzai) he has made himself a viable alternative candidate who promises to be a firm opponent of corruption while demonstrating proven fiscal competence.

The next candidate is Abdullah Abdullah, an ophthalmologist and Karzai’s former foreign affairs minister until 2006. Abdullah will likely pose the greatest challenge to Karzai’s re-election. Running a U.S. style campaign with rallies held across Afghanistan, Abdullah has been able to convey an image of change and competence. As a former member of the Northern Alliance, he is viewed as a hero for his efforts in overthrowing the Taliban regime. He is furthermore in favour of dialogue with the Taliban and will seek to end corruption in the government. At the same time, his service under Karzai has also enabled some to question his true dissimilarity from Karzai’s policies.

So as Afghans seek a president who can offer the right leadership and competence needed for establishing lasting peace in Afghanistan, their hopes and dreams rest on the shoulders of these three candidates. The final decisions will be made by Afghans when polls open at 7 am on August 20, 2009.

Live links to articles: [A Technocrat Shakes Up the Afghan Campaign](#), [With Karzai Favored to Win, U.S. Walks a Fine Line](#), [Q&A: Afghan Elections](#), [Afghan Elections: The main candidates](#), [Karzai in His Labyrinth](#), [Most Afghans see Karzai as winnable candidate: survey](#), [Battle over ballot boxes in Afghanistan](#), [Afghan rivals begin final poll push](#)

Recommended Readings

Brazen attack rattles Kabul and Afghan suicide bomb near NATO HQ

The Toronto Star, August 16, 2009 & BBC News Online, August 15, 2009

In the most ominous display yet in the lead-up to the Afghan elections, a suicide bomber detonated an SUV full of explosives just metres from the front entrance to the NATO ISAF Headquarters in Kabul. The street and its surrounds, which also house the embassies of the U.S., Italy and Spain, have been regarded as the most secure and heavily guarded in Kabul. This attack marked the first time the compound came under attack since it was established in 2002. What added to the shock was that the suicide bomber was able to pass through three police check points and enter the supposed secure zone before finally being stopped 30 metres from the compounds front entrance. The suicide bomber then detonated his 275kg bomb, leaving seven people dead and 100 wounded, including a Canadian RCMP officer. The attack not only left Kabul fearful of more attacks, but also questioned the preparedness of the Afghan National Police who are responsible for the security of Kabul.

The attack also shattered the relative calm of Kabul, which has not experienced a terrorist attack since February 2009. It further underlined the enormous danger which lurks when Afghans head to the polls on Thursday, August 20th. The Taliban, who were quick to take responsibility for the attack, have further threatened more violence against anyone who intends to vote in the election. Many view this latest attack as a prelude for more to come. **Read the full article [here](#).**

Russia postpones sending new Ambassador to Ukraine

International Herald Tribune, August 11, 2009 & Al Jazeera English, August 11, 2009

The relationship between Russia and Ukraine has continued to decline as Russian President Dmitri Medvedev criticizes Ukrainian President, Viktor Yushchenko for his “pro-Western” administration. In a letter to Yushchenko, Medvedev announced that he would delay sending a new Ambassador to Kiev for reasons such as siding with Georgia in the war that occurred last year, and for its bid to join NATO. He has also expressed anger at Yushchenko’s suggestion that Russia’s Black Sea Fleet be removed from a Ukrainian port city after 2017. Their deteriorating relationship suffered even more following disputes over gas prices earlier this year.

The next Presidential elections in Ukraine will be held on January 17, 2010 and Medvedev hopes that a new political leadership will be able to foster the partnership that Russia is seeking from Ukraine.

Read the full articles [here](#) and [here](#).

Sources: International Herald Tribune, Spiegel International Online, BBC News, CNN, The Economist, Reuters, World Socialist Web Site, The Moscow Times, The St. Petersburg Times, The Washington Post, ITAR-TASS.

We would like to know your opinion. Please, [email us](#) with your comments and suggestions!

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