

Opening Azerbaijan's Embassy in Israel: The Right Way to Strengthen Ties

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The decision by Azerbaijan to open an embassy in Israel corrects an existing asymmetry in the bilateral relations – while Israel has had an embassy in Baku since 1993, Baku had no embassy in Israel, despite the close relations between the two countries. The opening of the embassy can be understood against the background of the outcome of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020, the Abraham Accords, and the growing tension between Iran and Azerbaijan. Relations between Israel and Azerbaijan have withstood numerous challenges, including the deterioration of Israel's relations with Turkey, which is an important ally of Azerbaijan. Moreover, despite the secular nature of Azerbaijan, relations between Jerusalem and Baku cannot be viewed in isolation from Israel's relations with the rest of the Muslim world. For that reason, Baku is also sensitive to developments in the Palestinian arena, and thus along with an embassy in Israel, decided to open a representative office in Ramallah.

On November 26, 2022, the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, approved a parliamentary resolution of November 18 to open an embassy in Israel. This decision corrects the existing asymmetry: notwithstanding the close relations between Israel and Azerbaijan, and in spite of the existence of an Israeli embassy in Azerbaijan since 1993, Baku had no embassy in Israel. Azerbaijan's decision to open an embassy in Israel was accompanied by a decision to open a representative office in Ramallah.

There are three reasons for the Baku decision. The first is Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War against Armenia in 2020. During the war and according to the agreements that concluded it, Azerbaijan liberated seven regions adjoining Nagorno-Karabakh that had

been under Armenian control since the First Nagorno-Karabakh War, and also gained control over parts of the region. In the past, Baku was concerned that opening an embassy in Israel would arouse criticism among Arabs and Muslims, leading to anti-Azerbaijan votes in international forums, but in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War Baku achieved a decisive victory and is therefore less in need of support in the political arena. For its part, Armenia opened an embassy in Israel in 2020.

Another important catalyst for the decision was the signing of the Abraham Accords and normalization of relations between Turkey and Israel last August. These developments make full diplomatic relations between Israel and a Muslim country far more acceptable than previously. Today, more than a dozen Muslim countries have full diplomatic relations with Israel, some with a high public profile. In the context of Arab Gulf states, Azerbaijan also has close relations with the United Arab Emirates.

Baku's decision also comes against the background of the growing tension between Azerbaijan and Iran. Over the last three decades, because of the large Azeri population in Iran (around 15-20 percent of the population, according to various estimates), and concerns in Iran over separatist ambitions among the Azeri minority, Tehran supported Armenia in its conflict with Azerbaijan, although it officially declared neutrality. Moreover, Iran also covertly supports the Hussainiyoun Brigades, an organization that is opposed to the regime in Baku, although it is also careful about maintaining close ties with the Azerbaijani authorities. Tehran for its part takes a negative view of Baku's cooperation with Jerusalem and with Washington, and has expressed this openly and explicitly.

As Iran sees it, closer relations between Israel and Azerbaijan give Israel an opportunity to expand its presence and influence in the spheres of security and intelligence, including the use of territory in Azerbaijan for Israeli activity against targets in Iran. Indeed, the outcome of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War increased tensions between Iran and Azerbaijan because it extended their common border. Baku also has reservations about Iranian policy, particularly following the opening in October this year of the Iranian

consulate in Kapan, a town located in the southernmost district of Armenia. The location of the new consulate is perceived as problematic since Azerbaijan hopes to reach an agreement with Armenia and Russia to establish the Zangezur Corridor transport route, which will enable unimpeded access from Azerbaijan to the Nakhchivan exclave, which is part of Azerbaijan. In addition, Iran's recent military exercise along the border with Azerbaijan was deemed a threatening message to Baku. This exercise follows the exercise held last year, which was the first time since Azerbaijan's independence that Iran carried out a military exercise along their shared border. Moreover, an Iranian spy network was captured in Azerbaijan in November. In the past there were similar cases of Iranian subversion in Azerbaijan, as well as attempts to strike at Israeli and Jewish targets in the country. Yet despite all these subversive activities, Tehran did not manage to obstruct the defense cooperation between Israel and Azerbaijan or the opening of the Azerbaijan embassy in Israel.

Over the years, the leading components of the relations between Israel and Azerbaijan were the import of oil from Azerbaijan (about 40 percent of Israel's oil imports) and the export from Israeli defense industries to Azerbaijan, as well as their cooperation on intelligence matters. Recently, with the war in Ukraine, Azerbaijan began exporting grain to Israel, while an Israeli company is involved in the desalination facility in the Caspian Sea. In addition, before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, some 50,000 Israeli tourists travelled to Azerbaijan each year, and Baku hopes that this number will increase. As a preliminary step to opening the embassy in Israel, in 2021 Baku opened a trade office in Israel, indicating its intention to broaden the economic cooperation between the countries. In 2020 the volume of civilian trade between Israel and Azerbaijan (excluding oil) was about \$200 million. Azerbaijan is also proud that it has one of the largest Jewish communities in a Muslim country (estimates range from 15,000-30,000) and boasts of many years of religious tolerance. The Azeri community in Israel, numbering 50,000-70,000 people, is also an important bridge between the two countries.

Relations with Azerbaijan are likewise important in the context of Israel-Turkey relations. Over the years, the United States has encouraged the three countries to cooperate, and inter alia, Azerbaijan's oil exports to Israel run through Turkey. The fact that both Ankara and Jerusalem are perceived as important allies of Baku and that Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War is attributed in part to the assistance received from these two countries were among the factors that contributed to the warmer relations between Turkey and Israel over the past year. Azerbaijan President Aliyev tried to mediate between Jerusalem and Ankara to normalize their relations after the crisis in 2018. Significantly, in spite of the tensions between Israel and Turkey over the past decade, Baku's relations with Israel have not cooled – on the contrary, they have grown stronger. However, the Israel-Turkey-Azerbaijan triangle also embodies the potential for competition: Israeli and Turkish defense industries compete with each other, and this competition is likely to become more intense as Turkey's defense industry develops more advanced products.

Support for relations between Israel and Azerbaijan crosses party lines in Israel. Benjamin Netanyahu, expected to become the next prime minister, visited Azerbaijan twice as Israel's Prime Minister – in 1997 and 2016. His visit in 2016 is particularly memorable, since at that time President Aliyev said that Azerbaijan had so far purchased military systems from Israel worth \$5 billion. During the visit Netanyahu said that changes were evident in many parts of the Muslim world, and particularly in Arab states, "But I think if they want to see what the future could be, come to Azerbaijan and see the friendship and the partnership between Israel and Azerbaijan." These words can take on added significance with the opening of Azerbaijan's embassy in Israel, which can be interpreted as an outgrowth of the Abraham Accords.

Azerbaijan has been an important partner for Israel in recent decades as a reliable supplier of energy and in terms of security. The opening of the embassy in Israel is a welcome step from Jerusalem's perspective, reflecting the potential to expand relations to additional fields as well. At the same time, Azerbaijan, like other countries with a Muslim majority, is sensitive to

the Palestinian issue, and it is therefore not surprising that the move toward Jerusalem is accompanied by a move toward Ramallah. Turkey is also important in the context of relations between Jerusalem and Baku, and developments in relations between Ankara and Jerusalem could impact on decision making in Baku, although as the past decade has shown, they do not have decisive impact. For that reason, although relations between Jerusalem and Baku have strengths of their own, and in spite of the secular nature of Azerbaijan, they should not be considered as disconnected from Israel's relations with the rest of the Muslim world.

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