

Israel-Azerbaijan: Despite the Constraints, a Special Relationship

Gallia Lindenstrauss

Introduction

A telegram from the US embassy in Azerbaijan that was published in Wikileaks claimed that the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, compared Israel-Azerbaijan relations to an iceberg, with most of the relations being below the surface and only the edge visible.¹ Moreover, the strategic relations between the two countries, as long as they do not prompt the actors for adventurist policies, are consistent with the interests of the US and the West. It can even be asserted that Azerbaijan is the Muslim country with which Israel currently enjoys the closest relations. This might seem surprising, given that Azerbaijan has a common border with Iran and that most of its population is Shiite (although it has a strong secular tradition). Nevertheless, after more than two decades of diplomatic relations, it appears that relations are at a peak.

Following the visit by Israel's Minister of Defense Moshe Ya'alon to Azerbaijan in September 2014, *Haaretz* published several op-eds about arms exports from Israel to Azerbaijan, a key aspect of the relationship. One contributor argued that continuation of Israeli arms exports to Azerbaijan was liable to help cause a renewed outbreak of violence in Nagorno-Karabakh and lead to massacres by Azerbaijan against the Armenian population.² In contrast, articles written in response stressed the problems for Israel posed by the close relations between Armenia and Iran, and argued that Azerbaijan was a true partner of Israel.³ The ethnic cleansing committed by the Armenians against the Azeris in the 1990s, the responsibility of the Armenians for the failure to reach a solution to the dispute concerning

Dr. Gallia Lindenstrauss is a research fellow at INSS.

the Nagorno-Karabakh and nearby regions, and the Russian support for Armenia were also cited as contributing to the deadlock.⁴ This argument raises anew the question of the characteristics of the relations between Israel and Azerbaijan and to what degree the strategic relations between them are stable.

Background

In April 1992, not long after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Israel and Azerbaijan established diplomatic relations, and in 1993, Israel opened an embassy in Baku. Despite promises made over the years, Azerbaijan has chosen not to open an embassy in Tel Aviv, and instead maintains an unofficial channel of communication for inter-governmental dialogue through the Israel offices of the Azerbaijan airlines.⁵

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries, there have been a number of high level visits, although in most cases the visiting senior officials were Israelis.⁶ In 1997, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made an intermediate stop in Baku on his return from a visit to the Far East. In May 2009, President Shimon Peres made an official state visit to Azerbaijan, and Minister of Foreign Affairs Avigdor Lieberman made a number of official visits to Baku (in February 2010, April 2012, and April 2014). In April 2013, Azerbaijan Minister of Foreign Affairs Elmar Mammadyarov made a high level visit to Israel, while in September 2014, Minister Ya'alon became the first Israeli Minister of Defense to visit Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan is a target for Israeli defense industry exports. Israeli defense companies were also involved in training special forces and bodyguard missions for senior officials in Azerbaijan, constructing security systems for the airport in Baku, and upgrading military equipment from the Soviet era (especially tanks).⁷ In 2012, a \$1.6 billion transaction involving the sale of weapons by Israel Aerospace Industries to Azerbaijan was reported. The transaction included unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and satellite systems. Over the past three years, Azerbaijan has become an even more significant destination for Israeli arms exports, and it is believed that transactions worth \$4 billion were signed.⁸

The Azeri Interests in Relations with Israel

From Azerbaijan's perspective, one of the main goals of its foreign policy is redeeming territory lost during the dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh

in the early 1990s. Azerbaijan states that it does not rule out a return to violent conflict if the diplomatic negotiations to resolve the dispute are unsuccessful, and that it is preparing for such a conflict, in part through its relations with Israel.

The roots of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno Karabakh date back to 1920-21, when the question arose of delineating the border between the Soviet Socialist Republics Armenia and Azerbaijan in the framework of the Soviet Union. In 1921, Joseph Stalin, then Soviet Commissar of Nationalities, decided that Nagorno Karabakh, where most of the residents were Armenians, would be included as an autonomous oblast in Azerbaijan, not in Armenia. In 1988, the Armenians in Nagorno Karabakh declared that they wished to secede from Azerbaijan and unite with Armenia. In 1991, the Armenians conducted a referendum in Nagorno Karabakh, and declared the independence of the Republic of Nagorno Karabakh. The violent conflict in Nagorno Karabakh prompted 200,000 Armenians to flee from Azerbaijan to Nagorno Karabakh and Armenia, while 185,000 Azeris fled from Armenia and 45,000 from Nagorno Karabakh to Azerbaijan.⁹ Despite international attempts at mediation, the situation escalated continually from 1988 until the ceasefire in 1994. Since that time, Armenia has controlled about 16 percent of what was Azerbaijan's territory in the Soviet Union. Azerbaijan cooperated with the mediation efforts of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), but a solution to the dispute still appears a long way off, and Azerbaijan is also preparing for a scenario in which it will have to take military action. Israel is important in this context, because it is the only country willing to sell advanced weapon systems to Azerbaijan, largely given the embargo on arms sales to Azerbaijan and Armenia, at the declarative level at least, announced by the OSCE countries.

Another issue linking Azerbaijan and Israel is the Iranian threat, which the two countries regard as existential.¹⁰ Iran's anxiety about aspirations among the Azeris in Iran (where they are the largest minority in the country, believed to account for a fifth of Iran's population) to secede from Iran and establish a "Greater Azerbaijan" constitutes part of the fundamental problems in relations between Iran and Azerbaijan. In addition, during the war over Nagorno-Karabakh and the nearby areas Iran was (and still is) an ally of Armenia. Another source of dispute between Azerbaijan and Iran is the division of natural resources in the Caspian Sea, and in addition,

the Azerbaijanis accuse Iran of encouraging a religious revival among their Shiite population.

Azerbaijan is also trying to maintain a delicate balance in its relations with Russia, and regards its relations with the West, especially Israel, as essential to its efforts to retain an independent foreign policy. Azerbaijan does not wish to be a Russian satellite, even though it is quite aware of how much damage Russia can cause if it decides to engage Baku in confrontation. Azerbaijan is actually convinced that without Russian aid to Armenia, Armenia would be unable to continue controlling Nagorno Karabakh and the nearby areas. Azerbaijan finds the existence of Russian bases in Armenia – one of the factors deterring Azerbaijan from acting against Armenia – disturbing.

Even though Azerbaijan attributes great importance to its relations with Turkey, there are also a number of disputed points between the two countries. First, Azerbaijan regarded the attempts to thaw relations between Armenia and Turkey in 2009, and the signing of protocols between them – though without any progress toward a solution to the Nagorno Karabakh question – as a betrayal.¹¹ Azerbaijan complained that Turkey did not even inform it in advance about the negotiations, and was surprised to learn about them in the press;¹² consequently, it was asserted, the bilateral relations have not recovered since. Aliyev's regime also views with alarm some of the Islamization processes promoted by the Justice and Development Party, which run counter to the secular heritage instilled by Atatürk, and regards also them as a threat to Azerbaijan's secular character. Beyond this, Azerbaijan

One of the expectations in Azerbaijan is that close relations with Israel will improve its image and help sell Azerbaijan's policy in Washington.

feels that it cannot rely on Turkey being at its side in the event of a major confrontation with Russia. Following the signing of the protocols between Turkey and Armenia, Azerbaijan significantly increased its defense budget,¹³ a measure that benefited, among others, the Israeli defense industries. A public expression of Azerbaijan's increasing interest in arms purchases and the Israeli context can be seen in the fact that Ya'alon's visit to Azerbaijan was in

the framework of the first international defense exhibition organized in Baku. Approximately 20 percent of the display space was occupied by Israeli companies.¹⁴

One of the expectations in Azerbaijan is that close relations with Israel will improve its image and help sell Azerbaijan's policy in Washington.¹⁵

Azerbaijan regards help from the pro-Israel lobby as a counterweight to the extensive influence on American foreign policy that it attributes to the Armenian lobby. In Azerbaijan's relations with the Israel lobby, it also relies on the narrative (shared by representatives of the Jewish community in Azerbaijan) that there has never been any anti-Semitism in Azerbaijan.¹⁶

The Israeli Interests in Relations with Azerbaijan

The fact that it borders Iran makes Azerbaijan an ideal site for gathering intelligence about the Islamic republic. Electronic intelligence gathering stations were built along the border between Azerbaijan and Iran in the 1990s in cooperation with Israel, and in 2011, Israel began to supply Azerbaijan with unmanned aerial vehicles to monitor the border.¹⁷ From time to time, allegations are sounded that the two countries are engaged in tactical cooperation against Iran. Israel also cooperates with Azerbaijan in the war against terrorism and helped expose Hizbollah terrorist cells poised to take action, including against the Israeli ambassador to Azerbaijan and a Jewish school run by Chabad in Baku.¹⁸ In March 2012, a report published in *Foreign Policy* stated that Azerbaijan had granted Israel permission in principle to use a number of bases for an attack on Iran,¹⁹ a report that attracted a great deal of attention. The Azeri authorities fervently denied the report, and Minister of Foreign Affairs Liberman commented that some of the military correspondents had an overactive imagination and would be better off writing science fiction film scripts.²⁰

The relations between Israel and Azerbaijan developed with American encouragement as part of a triangular relationship between Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Israel. In the 1990s, the idea was that the Israel-Turkey-Georgia-Azerbaijan axis, supported by the US, would be a counterweight to the Syria-Iran-Armenia-Russia axis.²¹ The crisis in relations between Israel and Turkey over the past decade and the war in Georgia in 2008 challenged the idea of this axis, but Azerbaijan and Israel still regard the relations between them as matching the interests of the West in the region.

Another important Israeli interest is the import of oil from Azerbaijan. A significant portion of the oil consumed by Israel (an estimated 40 percent) is imported from Azerbaijan or by way of Azerbaijan through the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline. A subsidiary of the State Oil Company of the Azerbaijan Republic (SOCAR) even took part in the oil drillings by Shemen Oil off the Ashdod coast. The drilling was unsuccessful, but indicated Azerbaijan's willingness to cooperate with Israel and invest in its energy

matters.²² Following the natural gas discoveries off the Mediterranean coast, Israeli Ambassador to Azerbaijan Rafael Harpaz also stated that Israel could learn something from Azerbaijan's experience in the energy sector,²³ in particular from the founding of the national oil company.

Israel's relations with Azerbaijan should be regarded as part of its attempt to breach its isolation in the Muslim world, and as part of the continuing influence of the notion of the "Peripheral Alliance."²⁴ The close relations with Azerbaijan are likewise part of an attempt to foster close relations with countries in the Caucasus and Central Asia in accordance with the plan by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs to enhance its partnership with Georgia, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan.²⁵

Weaknesses of the Alliance

Pressure from the Neighboring Countries

Among the major weaknesses of the bilateral relations is the fact that Azerbaijan is subject to pressure from the neighboring countries, some of which look askance at the alliance between Israel and Azerbaijan. Iran, for example, severely criticizes the strategic links between Azerbaijan and Israel. During President Peres' visit to Azerbaijan in May 2009, the Iranian military chief of staff said the visit was "a step in the wrong direction," adding that the visit was considered an unfriendly act in Azerbaijan-Iran relations.²⁶ And indeed, despite the existing disputes between Iran and Azerbaijan, Azerbaijan has no wish to enter into a direct confrontation with its southern neighbor. Azerbaijan recognizes its weakness vis-à-vis Iran, and therefore stresses that it will not allow an attack from its territory

Azerbaijan fears that in the event of an attack against Iran, or any state of confrontation between Iran and the West, it will be the first to suffer from an Iranian response.

against the nuclear facilities in Iran. Azerbaijan fears that in the event of an attack against Iran and/or any state of confrontation between Iran and the West, it will be the first to suffer from an Iranian response. In effect, it fears that even if there is an internal coup in Iran, there will be negative consequences for Azerbaijan.²⁷ Azerbaijan is also dependent on Iran for a passage to Nakhchivan, an Azerbaijani exclave that is the origin of the Aliyev clan.

Following the crisis in relations between Israel and Turkey and the May 2010 *Mavi Marmara* incident, Turkey tried to pressure Azerbaijan to cool its relations with Israel. For example, it was alleged that in September 2011 the Turkish ambassador to Azerbaijan threatened

that Israel would have to take into account possible disruptions of the supply of oil through the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline.²⁸ From Azerbaijan's perspective, there is no strategic change that undermines the reasoning behind their alliance with Israel, but over the years, Turkey and Azerbaijan have emphasized the narrative of "one people, two countries" to reflect the closeness between them, and it is therefore difficult for Azerbaijan to completely ignore Turkey's views.

Despite Azerbaijan's wish to cultivate and preserve its relations with the West, including Israel, fear of Russia is also a stumbling block. For example, the Russia-Georgia war was perceived as a sign of Russia's neo-imperialist ambitions in the Caucasus. The war in Georgia likewise dramatized to Azerbaijan that the US regarded the Caucasus as being on Russia's backdoor, and it was therefore unwilling to confront Russia about conflicts in the area. The close relations between Russia and Armenia and the conflict in Nagorno Karabakh constrain Azerbaijan's ability to achieve progress in its relations with the West, and also make Azerbaijan very vulnerable to an increase in Russian influence in the region.²⁹ Indeed, Russia has tried a number of times to pressure Israel not to sell sophisticated weapon systems to Azerbaijan.³⁰

Stability of the Aliyev Regime and Azerbaijan's Secular Identity

Another weakness in the alliance is its dependence on the continued rule of the Aliyev dynasty, or at least the preservation of the country's secular identity. Heydar Aliyev, the father of the current ruler, a former senior KGB official and first Secretary of Azerbaijan during the Soviet era, managed to cultivate support based on his strong personality. His son Ilham lacks his father's charisma, and when he assumed the post many doubted his ability to retain his seat³¹ – although he too is developing a personality cult. The clan aspect is important in Azeri politics and many of the Aliyev clan benefit from the spoils of government, but this contributes to corruption in the country.³² The fairness of most elections in the country since it became independent in the 1990s is disputed, and the restriction on the number of presidential terms was eliminated in 2009, thereby stressing the autocratic intentions of the Aliyev regime.³³ In recent years, criticism of human rights violations and the harsh restrictions on freedom of expression in Azerbaijan has increased (as well as arrests of journalists³⁴), as reflected more frequently on the social networks and in the international media.³⁵

The secular identity of most citizens of Azerbaijan is still strong, but some degree of religious revival is discernible, mainly among young people (in part as a result of attempts by religious groups in Iran, Turkey, and the Persian Gulf to gain influence).³⁶ The regime's attempts to counter what it defines as religious extremism are sometimes perceived as an overreaction and a violation of freedom of expression.³⁷ The army also suffers from corruption problems,³⁸ in which the families of conscripts pay bribes to have their sons stationed far from the front. The replacement of the Minister of Defense following the 2013 elections was regarded as an attempt to set things right in the army,³⁹ but the problems have not yet been solved.

In addition, there are question marks about the future of the energy resources, which account for about 90 percent of Azerbaijan's exports. Azerbaijan's oil production peaked in 2010, and since then the reserves have diminished. Without significant new discoveries, Azerbaijan will be left without oil resources by 2025.⁴⁰ The authorities in Azerbaijan have belittled this threat, at least publicly. For example, an Azerbaijani official has stated that "we won't run out of oil in a day and there are also prospects for gas production as well as other projects."⁴¹ At the same time, the ability of the

Azeri economy to prosper and the Aliyev regime to survive without energy resources is questionable.

Pressure from the Muslim World

Another weakness in the bilateral relations is that Azerbaijan is finding it difficult to withstand pressure from the Muslim world to refrain from tightening its relations with Israel (at least publicly). This is the basis for Azerbaijan's opposition to opening an embassy in Israel, and for its votes against Israel's views in international forums.⁴² It is feared that opening an embassy in Israel would contribute to the Muslim world's hostility on decisions relating to the Nagorno Karabakh conflict.⁴³ In particular, of all the international organizations, only the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation supports the Azerbaijani position in this conflict.

In many respects Azerbaijan is irreplaceable for Israel, and the proximity of this country to Iran makes it especially attractive. It can therefore be argued that the current gains from the relations are worth the risk that Israel is running with regard to the possibility of a future regime change in Azerbaijan.

Conclusion

While many countries perceive Iran, and especially its nuclear program, as a threat, most do not regard it as an existential threat; the few countries that do, include both Israel and Azerbaijan. At the same time, the fact that Azerbaijan is a neighbor of Iran forces it to act cautiously in coping with this threat, while attempting to preserve a degree of communication and relations with the regime in Tehran.

As with Israel's other "special" relationships, doubts arise about the stability of the relations with Azerbaijan in the event of significant regime changes there. The lesson that can be learned from the collapse of previous relationships is that it is difficult to predict the collapse of regimes in real time, and in the event of a change in regime, relations with the new regime will almost certainly be poor (the most prominent examples in this context are Iran and South Africa, but Turkey can also be cited). In order to avoid this situation, signs of weakness in the current regime should be monitored closely. At the same time, in many respects Azerbaijan is irreplaceable for Israel, and the proximity of this country to Iran makes it especially attractive. It can therefore be argued that the current gains from the relations are worth the risk that Israel is running with regard to the possibility of a future regime change in Azerbaijan. In any case, caution should be exercised, and a situation in which there is no prior preparation for a change in regime should be avoided as much as possible. The positive strong statements by Israeli spokesmen about the Aliyev regime, which are deemed objectionable by the part of the population protesting against the regime, should also be reviewed.⁴⁴ Azerbaijan regards the community of immigrants from Azerbaijan in Israel as an asset for it, and as one of the reasons for the current close relations between Azerbaijan and Israel. Israel should likewise see this community as an asset that can help solidify a link between the countries and as a source of information about changes in internal Azerbaijani politics.

Notes

- 1 WikiLeaks, <https://wikileaks.org/cable/2009/01/09BAKU20.html>.
- 2 Yair Oron, "Israel Must Not Sell Arms to the Azeris," *Haaretz*, October 26, 2014.
- 3 Maxime Gauin and Alexander Murinson, "Baku to the Future: Azerbaijan, not Armenia is Israel's True Ally," *Haaretz*, October 29, 2014.

- 4 Avinoam Idan, "Things You Should Know," *Haaretz*, November 2, 2014; Arye Gut and Emil Abramov, "Azerbaijan is Important to Israel," *Haaretz*, November 11, 2014.
- 5 Alexander Murinson, "The Ties between Israel and Azerbaijan," *Mideast Security and Policy Studies* No. 110 (October 2014): 14.
- 6 See in this context the last-minute cancellation of a visit to Israel by the Azerbaijani Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1999 at the order of then-President Heydar Aliyev. Alexander Murinson, *Turkey's Entente with Israel and Azerbaijan: State Identity and Security in the Middle East and Caucasus* (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 127.
- 7 Murinson, "The Ties between Israel and Azerbaijan," pp. 22-24.
- 8 Barbara Opall-Rome, "Israel Bolsters Strategic Ties with Azerbaijan," *Defense News*, September 10, 2014.
- 9 Edmund Herzig, *The New Caucasus: Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia* (London: Royal Institute for International Affairs, 1999), p. 66.
- 10 Alexander Murinson, "Opportunities and Challenges in Israeli-Azerbaijani Relations," *Caucasus International* 2, no. 2 (2012): 187.
- 11 Thomas de Waal, *The Caucasus: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 130.
- 12 Tulin Daloglu, "Turkey-Azerbaijan Relations Still Strong," *al-Monitor*, November 4, 2013.
- 13 Murinson, "Opportunities and Challenges in Israeli-Azerbaijani Relations," p. 186.
- 14 Amir Rapaport, "Will the Alliance with Azerbaijan Help Israel against Iran?" *Maarivnrg*, September 11, 2014.
- 15 Murinson, "Opportunities and Challenges in Israeli-Azerbaijani Relations," p. 180.
- 16 "There has Never been Anti-Semitism in Azerbaijan – Arye Gut," *News-Az*, November 12, 2013.
- 17 Murinson, "The Ties between Israel and Azerbaijan," p. 22.
- 18 Michael Segall, "Iran Fears Growing Israel-Azerbaijan Cooperation," *Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs Issue Brief* 13, no. 12, May 17, 2013.
- 19 Mark Perry, "Israel's Secret Staging Ground," *Foreign Policy*, March 28, 2012.
- 20 Murinson, "Opportunities and Challenges in Israeli-Azerbaijani Relations," pp. 178-79.
- 21 Savante E. Cornell, *Azerbaijan since Independence* (London: M. E. Sharpe, 2011), p. 374.
- 22 Shahin Abbasov, "Azerbaijan: SOCAR to Use Israeli Oil Field as Proving Ground," *Eurasianet.org*, May 8, 2012.
- 23 Murinson, "The Ties between Israel and Azerbaijan," p. 17.
- 24 Yoel Guzansky and Gallia Lindenstrauss, "Revival of the Periphery Concept in Israel's Foreign Policy?" *Strategic Assessment* 15, no. 2 (2012): 27-29.
- 25 Eli Bardenstein, "Foreign Ministry Aiming at Partnership with Iran's Neighbors," *Maarivnrg*, November 4, 2013.

- 26 Murinson, "Opportunities and Challenges in Israeli-Azerbaijani Relations," p. 184.
- 27 Joshua W. Walker, "Eurasia's Hinge: Azerbaijan's Triangular Balancing Act," *Caucasus International* 12, no. 2 (2010): 29.
- 28 Dudi Cohen, "Turkey to Azerbaijan: Stand with Us against Israel," *YnetNews*, September 25, 2011.
- 29 Walker, "Eurasia's Hinge," p. 33.
- 30 Murinson, "The Ties between Israel and Azerbaijan," p. 24.
- 31 Stephen Mulvey, "Profile: Ilham Aliyev," *BBC News*, October 16, 2003.
- 32 Murinson, *Turkey's Entente with Israel and Azerbaijan*, pp. 125-26.
- 33 Suha Bolukbasi, *Azerbaijan: A Political History* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014), pp. 217, 220.
- 34 For a review of the extent of arrests of journalists see "A Year in Azerbaijan: 'Europe's Biggest' Media Prison," *Radio Free Europe*, January 7, 2015.
- 35 For example, see Anshel Pfeffer, "Baku in the USSR? Azerbaijan Could be Set to Abandon the West and Head East," *Haaretz*, December 12, 2014; Altay Goyushov, "The Two Faces of Azerbaijan's Government," *Foreign Policy*, December 6, 2014.
- 36 Altay Goyushov, "Islamic Revival in Azerbaijan," *Hudson Institute*, November 11, 2008, <http://www.hudson.org/research/9815-islamic-revival-in-azerbaijan>.
- 37 "Azeris Speak Out on Mosque Closures," *BBC News*, November 3, 2014.
- 38 "Azerbaijan: Defence Sector Management and Reform," *International Crisis Group Europe Briefing*, No. 50, October 29, 2009.
- 39 Thomas de Waal, "A Changing Skyline in Azerbaijan," *Eurasia Outlook*, November 6, 2013.
- 40 Cornell, *Azerbaijan since Independence*, p. 199.
- 41 Margarita Antidze, "Azerbaijan's Leader Set to Keep Power but Problems Loom," *Reuters*, October 4, 2013.
- 42 "Odd but Useful Allies," *The Economist*, January 21, 2012.
- 43 Elnut Ismayilov, "Israel and Azerbaijan: The Evolution of a Strategic Partnership," *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 8, no. 1 (2013): 74.
- 44 Eldar Mamedov, "How Deep are Azerbaijan-Israel Relations," *Eurasianet Commentary*, January 18, 2013.