



# TURKEYSCOPE

INSIGHTS ON TURKISH AFFAIRS

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**Vol. 6, No. 4, July - August 2022**

## **The Sky is the Limit: The Azerbaijan-Israel-Türkiye Trio and the Greater Middle East**

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In the aftermath of the Second Karabakh War in 2020, three flags—those of Azerbaijan, Türkiye,\* and Israel—were carried by Azerbaijani citizens as they paraded around Baku to celebrate the victory against Armenia on November 10, 2020. Rallies, buildings, and cars were decorated with Israeli colors, which clearly displayed the positive sentiment in Azerbaijan towards the Jewish state. Indeed, given the strong historical relations between the Jews, Azeris and the Turks this picture should not surprise anyone. On the contrary, in the light of the changing regional conjuncture and the recent reconciliation process between Israel and Türkiye, it seems that this brotherly relationship will deepen further and soon be turned into a strategic partnership.

### **Azerbaijani-Jewish relations**

If you drive two to three hours north from Baku, Azerbaijan`s capital city, you will soon find yourself in a *shtetl*, Azerbaijan`s famed Jewish community. Claimed to be the world`s only all-Jewish town outside Israel and the United States, this *shtetl*, *Qırmızı Qəsəbə* (Red Town), is home to at least 4,000 people and is sometimes referred to as Jerusalem of the Caucasus.

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\* Recently, the Turkish government has adopted the spelling of Turkey as Türkiye in all English-language publications. This has been used in this essay.

At first glance, it might be surprising to find a Jewish settlement in a predominantly Shi'a Muslim country; and yet the territory of Azerbaijan has hosted these indigenous Mountain Jews for at least 2,000 years.<sup>1</sup> Azerbaijan has no documented conflict between Jews and Muslims in its history.

The harmony between the Muslims and Jews in Azerbaijan could be one of the reasons for the excellent relations between Azerbaijan and Israel, who have called each other reliable partners and whose partnership predates the historic *Abraham Accords*. A stable system of relations was built between Azerbaijan and Israel as a result of strategic thinking, which has endured through various upheavals and continues to grow. These relations are solid and based not only on cooperation of the elites, but also on the societal perceptions between Azerbaijan and Israel, which are friendly and mutually supportive.

### **Cooperation between Azerbaijan and Israel**

Israel has made Azerbaijan its primary source of energy due to this trust. As one of the main importers of Azerbaijani oil via the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, Israel receives over half of its petroleum demands from the Caspian country.<sup>2</sup>

Another successful sector of Azerbaijani-Israeli cooperation is military and defense industry. Due to the long-running armed conflict with Armenia, many advanced Western nations refused to supply Azerbaijan with weaponry. In addition to that, in the past Türkiye's defense industry could not provide and develop state-of-the-art products. Therefore, in order to break away from its former dependence on Russian-made weapons, Baku turned to Israel for military technology.

This partnership has grown to the point that in 2019 Azerbaijan became the second largest customer of the Israeli military industry (17 percent) after India.<sup>3</sup> Working with Israel's defense industry companies, such as Elbit, IAI MALAT and RAFAEL (formerly ADS), Azerbaijan put more emphasis on Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs). As a result, the acquisition of modern Israeli UAVs and Israeli technological transfer (joint drone-making) has significantly increased Azerbaijan's military-technical superiority over Armenia and eventually contributed to Baku's triumph in the 2020 Second Karabakh war. The transfer of such vitally significant know-how to Azerbaijan is a clear illustration of the strategic nature of relations, considering how much

Israeli drone technology was coveted by many nations, especially Iran, Azerbaijan's southern neighbor.

Israel has boosted Azerbaijan's combat capabilities in air, at sea and on land: the Israeli side helped to build cutting-edge vessels with guided missiles with a 25 km range and advanced navigation systems for the Azerbaijani coast guard at the military shipyard in Turkan, Baku's suburbs. The hydro-carbon resources, which are the foundation of Azerbaijan's economy, are currently protected by the Israeli-made OPV-62 and Shaldag Mk. V ships. The parties also agreed to the production of Saar S72 corvettes,<sup>4</sup> which will strengthen Azerbaijan's naval deterrence capabilities. These corvettes will be equipped with anti-aircraft missile systems, cruise missiles, and AESA radars. Additionally, Israel sold<sup>5</sup> Azerbaijan "Gabriel V" anti-ship missiles, which have a 200–400 km range and a high degree of accuracy.

Azerbaijan's airspace is also under reliable protection: the "Barak 8" air defense system, which can obliterate targets from a distance of 150 kilometers, has been put to the test in combat in Azerbaijan. This system assisted Baku in destroying the new Russian-made Iskander ballistic missiles and Soviet-made Scud missiles, which Saddam Hussein also used to attack Israel.<sup>6</sup> The Israeli-made Green Pine radar system, which uses next-generation technology and can observe all targets within a distance of 800 km, is a crucial component of Azerbaijan's air defense.<sup>7</sup>

The military partnership between the two countries survived the test of the Second Karabakh war in the fall of 2020. Throughout the conflict, Azerbaijan and her allies came under intense pressure. For instance, Canada put pressure on Türkiye to stop selling "Bayraktar TB2" UAVs to Baku,<sup>8</sup> which were crucial for Azerbaijani army's advancement. Obviously, groups that desired a pro-Armenian outcome to the conflict pressured Israel too, but the latter opted to stand by its strategic partner rather than submit to interest-based lobbying groups. Israel consistently sent Baku the military supplies it needed throughout the conflict to ensure that Azerbaijan's armed forces faced no obstacles at the front.<sup>9</sup>

### **Azerbaijan and Israel's Continued Cooperation after the War**

The Azerbaijan-Israeli relations opened a new chapter following the 2020 Second Karabakh War. Azerbaijan decided to establish representative offices with diplomatic status in Israel for

the first time in the summer of 2021. In addition, significant agreements in two key strategic areas were established between the two nations. One of the agreements states that Israel,<sup>10</sup> dubbed the *Miracle in the Desert*, will assist Azerbaijan in rebuilding its agricultural system and in return, Azerbaijan will supply agricultural products to Israel to guarantee the security of its food supplies. With the use of contemporary technologies, Azerbaijan's agriculture, which has enormous potential, a favorable climate, and fruitful conditions, is expected to see incredible results in a relatively short amount of time.

It is predicted that future conflicts would take place on the water. Israel and Azerbaijan share more than just similar strategic goals; they also both face grave threats to their water resources. According to the new intergovernmental agreement, Israel, which desalinates Mediterranean Sea water to partially cover its water needs, will collaborate with Baku to modernize Azerbaijan's water management system. Since non-modern farming practices waste a significant amount of water in Azerbaijan, the driest South Caucasus nation, the drought there is getting worse every year. Similarly, the pre-2011 Syrian case is an illustration of how drought *also* contributed to instability.<sup>11</sup>

Geopolitically, both Azerbaijan and Israel are tied because of a similar perception of threat from Iran. Although Baku usually states that Azerbaijani-Israeli partnership is not built against a third party, the Islamic Republic of Iran feels both uncomfortable and vulnerable. It is also psychologically difficult for the Tehran regime to accept the fact that a Shi'a-majority nation cultivates excellent relations with a Jewish state. Therefore, the threats against Azerbaijan from the top Iranian authorities have been quite common since the mid-1990s. Most recently, in September 2021, the Iranian side assembled thousands of soldiers along the Azerbaijan border and staged a large military drill. The threat generated an immediate reaction of Baku. President Ilham Aliyev sent his message to Tehran by gently caressing the Israel-made Harop kamikaze drone in front of cameras.

Azerbaijan and Israel may be very exposed to Tehran's expansionist ambitions if the nuclear-armed Khorramshahr and Sejil ballistic missiles, which are made in Iran and have a range of more than 2000 km, are launched in the direction of either country. According to both Iranian specialists and U.S. intelligence services Iran is reportedly growing closer than ever to obtaining a nuclear bomb.

## A Potential Geopolitical Triangle

But can Azerbaijan and Israel work together to thwart Tehran's nuclear and neo-imperial aspirations? One hesitates to say "yes" directly. The anti-nuclear duet must grow and include additional like-minded players in the region. For years, the Americans have been doing their best to create the Middle East replica of NATO against Iran, by trying to normalize the hostile relations between Israel and major Arab states. Yet, to make a serious change in the international arena, the geopolitical attention must turn to Türkiye.

Although there have been significant upheavals in Israeli-Turkish diplomatic ties since the Operation Cast Lead (2008), the dialogue between the two countries on intelligence, security, and economy have nearly always continued. In terms of diplomatic ties, the two nations have been advancing politically day by day in recent years. When Israeli President Herzog visited Turkish President Erdoğan in March 2022, he made it clear that complete normalization of relations is imminent. After a 15-year absence, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu visited Israel and expressed interest in mending and strengthening ties with his Israeli counterpart.

Israeli-Turkish *rapprochement* has been one of the foreign policy priorities of Azerbaijan, who wishes to develop it into a tripartite format. This is why the Azerbaijani side even offered to host a summit of three countries in 2021. An Azerbaijan-Israel-Türkiye triangle would definitely fit into Baku's strategy of trilateral alliances.<sup>12</sup> Such a configuration would be a decent move in light of geopolitical developments in the region and send a clear message to Tehran, who has over the past ten years skillfully exploited tensions among various nations, including those between Israel, Türkiye and the Gulf States and sought to expand its military presence in the Middle East.

The potential of this trio goes far beyond just standing up against a strong adversary. In light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, politicians of all three countries will need to revisit their energy and food security strategies. Azerbaijan's energy, Türkiye's resources, and Israel's technology can provide flexible solutions to solve crises that these three states may experience in the near and mid-term.

Central Asia is one of the areas where Azerbaijan can work with Israel and Türkiye. The European Union's historically significant energy agreement was signed in Baku by Commissioner Ursula von der Leyen last month. There, she stressed Azerbaijan's crucial role of serving as the EU's gateway to Central Asia. Russia and China have been in rivalry for years over control of this region rich in hydrocarbon resources. The possibility exists that the area bordering Iran, China, and Russia could see geopolitical strife in the future.

Therefore, intensifying links with Central Asia is crucial and could be a game-changer. From the very beginning, Azerbaijan and Türkiye have maintained cordial ties with these nations that share a similar ethnolinguistic heritage with Turks. In recent years, many officials in this region, also referred to as the "backyard of Russia," have chosen to strengthen their ties with Ankara to cope with the neo-imperial ambitions of Moscow and Beijing. Israel also maintains a wide range of relationships with Central Asia. Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan are Israel's top regional trading partners. But trilateral cooperation is necessary for boosting Israel's potential trade in this area. In this region, which is resource-rich and conveniently situated in terms of land transportation arteries, the Azerbaijan-Israel-Türkiye trio can carry out a number of collaborative projects.

## **Conclusion**

The bilateral relations between Azerbaijan and Türkiye, Azerbaijan and Israel, and Israel and Türkiye can be characterized as fraternal, strategic and normalizing respectively. Currently, cooperation exists in the energy sector, which can be expanded into political, economic, military, security, agricultural and connectivity projects. The proximity of Azerbaijan, Israel, and Türkiye is mandated by a number of variables. At this moment, given the tectonic changes in the Middle East and the Caucasus it is time for the three countries to seize the opportunity to actively cooperate in order to promote their national interests and overcome shared challenges.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of State Report on Global Anti-Semitism (July 1, 2003 – December 15, 2004), January 5, 2005, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/g/drl/rls/40258.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Arye Gut, "What turned Azerbaijan into linchpin of energy diversity, security?" *The Jerusalem Post*, September 24, 2019, <https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/what-turned-azerbaijan-into-linchpin-of-energy-diversity-security-602702>.

<sup>3</sup> Anna Ahronheim, "Israel's arms exports over past four years at highest ever," *The Jerusalem Post*, March 11, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/israels-arms-exports-over-past-four-years-at-highest-ever-620561>.

<sup>4</sup> "Азербайджан покупает у Израиля новые боевые корабли?" (Azerbaijan buys new warships from Israel) *Haqqin.az*, November 15, 2019, <https://haqqin.az/news/163049>.

<sup>5</sup> "Azerbaijan's Israeli Weapons: A Lot For Armenia, But A Little For Iran, Too?" *Eurasianet*, April 12, 2012, <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijans-israeli-weapons-a-lot-for-armenia-but-a-little-for-iran-too>.

<sup>6</sup> Mushvig Mehdiyev, "Armenia Used Iskander Missiles Against Azerbaijan in Karabakh War, Says Armenian Expert," *Caspian News*, September 23, 2021, <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/armenia-used-iskander-missiles-against-azerbaijan-in-karabakh-war-says-armenian-expert-2021-9-23-0/>.

<sup>7</sup> "Azerbaijan buys Israeli weapons, but is very cautious," *News.am*, March 29, 2019, <https://news.am/eng/news/504144.html>.

<sup>8</sup> "Canada blocks arms exports to Turkey," *Hurriyyet Daily News*, April 12, 2021, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-urges-canada-to-review-defense-embargo-163895>.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Haboush, "Israel sending weapons to Azerbaijan as fight with Armenia rages on," *Al Arabiya*, September 30, 2020, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/world/2020/10/01/Israel-sending-weapons-to-Azerbaijan-as-fight-with-Armenia-rages-on-Sources>.

<sup>10</sup> Mahammad Mammadov, "Azerbaijan and Israel aim to boost agricultural cooperation amid concerns about food security," *Topchubashov Center*, June 2, 2022, <https://top-center.org/en/analytics/3380/azerbaijan-and-israel-aim-to-boost-agricultural-cooperation-amid-concerns-about-food-security>.

<sup>11</sup> Jennifer Holleis, "How climate change paved the way to war in Syria," *DW*, February 26, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/how-climate-change-paved-the-way-to-war-in-syria/a-56711650>.

<sup>12</sup> Rusif Huseynov, "Azerbaijan's strategy of trilateral alliances," *Topchubashov Center*, March 18, 2021, <https://www.top-center.org/en/expert-opinion/3106/azerbaijans-strategy-of-trilateral-alliances>.