



Israel and Azerbaijan: Geopolitical Reasons for Stronger Ties

by Dr. Anna Geifman and Dima Course

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 208, July 15, 2013

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Israel and Azerbaijan have developed strong strategic ties. Israel benefits from having a Muslim ally on Iran's border and Azerbaijan has gained a serious partner in the political, military, and technology spheres. Even so, the countries have much to gain from strengthening their ties even further.

The South Caucasus region is of strategic value for Israel due to its geopolitical position and proximity to Iran. Azerbaijan, a key player in the region, is a Shiite Muslim country which maintains close working relations with the Jewish state. Strained relations between Azerbaijan and Iran are an equally critical factor. Aside from the fact that Israel is dealing with a classic situation of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend," it benefits from selling the Azeris technical services, technologies, and security systems. Moreover, Israel has always been on the lookout for a moderate Muslim partner, a role previously filled by Turkey. Azerbaijan can fit that role. It is hardly accidental that President Shimon Peres, accompanied by three ministers and representatives of sixty Israeli industrial companies, visited Baku in 2009. Then Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman made a trip to Azerbaijan in April 2012. His counterpart, Azeri Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov, paid a return visit to Israel in April 2013. Presently, the bilateral relationship is good, and there are prospects for even stronger ties between the two countries.

Threats from Iran

Turmoil in the Middle East affects the Caspian Sea region and simultaneously provides opportunities for Israel, whose mutual interest with Azerbaijan is to confront an increasingly radical Islam. Though nominally Muslim,

Azerbaijan's secular regime perceives both Sunni and Shiite fundamentalists as an alarming threat. The Sunni radicals connected to al-Qaeda are willing to cooperate with neighboring Dagestan's terrorist underground, which is periodically activated in the northern parts of Azerbaijan. An even greater reason for concern is the Shiite radicals; they are a tool for Iran's Revolutionary Guards and seek radical changes in Azerbaijan to turn it into a pro-Iranian regime. Any contact with Israel therefore cause anxiety in Tehran; for example, the 2009 Peres visit to Baku led to complications between Baku and Teheran and the recalling of the Iranian ambassador "for consultations."

There is also strong evidence to believe that Iran is intent on undermining domestic stability in Azerbaijan. In October 2011, the leader of pro-Iranian Islamic Party of Azerbaijan Movsum Samadov and several of his comrades were sentenced to 10-12 years in jail for attempting to overthrow the government by terrorist means. In February 2012, dozens of militants were arrested in a rural area near Baku. Iran also persistently threatens its northern neighbor; shortly after Samadov's arrest, Iranian Chief-of-Staff Maj. Gen. Hassan Firouzabadi promised Azeri President Ilham Aliyev "a grim future."

It is therefore not surprising that, according to foreign sources, Azerbaijan is a strategic bridgehead of Western and Israeli anti-Iranian military and intelligence efforts. Tehran is nervous about persistent, if officially denied, rumors about Israeli military presence in Azerbaijan as a forward base against Iran. Regardless of the validity of these rumors, Israeli authorities appreciate the importance of cooperation with Azerbaijan, which seeks to hold its own under the Iranian threat. In early 2012 this collaboration yielded valuable results: the prevention of terrorist attacks against Israeli diplomats in Baku.

Threats from Russia

Aside from Iran, Russia is a reason that Baku and Jerusalem should strengthen their strategic partnership. Israel is upset about Russia's subversive presence in the Middle East, namely its interactions with Iran, acceptance of Hamas, and persistent backing of the Syrian regime. Azerbaijan is also unhappy with Moscow's support for Armenia's position in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Yet, Israel may be swayed into better relations with Russia due to potential benefits from collaborative ventures in the technological sphere, as well as joint fear of radical Islam; contrary to what may look like a partnership, Russia's relations with Iran are quite strained.

In 2011, the "Center-2011" maneuvers took place in the Caspian Sea, the largest such exercise since 2002. Some one thousand Russian servicemen and dozens of vessels and boats participated. Despite attempts on the part of some

commentators to explain the maneuvers as necessitated by NATO's presence in Afghanistan and Turkey, it appears that the "alleged enemy" was none other than Iran, or possibly local proxies. A similar exercise in the Caspian Sea took place this April. Iran could react aggressively towards Azerbaijan in the event of a Western attack on its nuclear program. For its part, Baku is aware that Moscow is supportive of its secular regime and is friendly towards the Azeri position with regards to the Caspian Sea division.

The Nagorno-Karabakh Issue

There is also the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh, which is a connecting point between Azerbaijan and Israel. For Azerbaijan, Armenia is a bitter enemy with whom there are no serious chances for reconciliation in the foreseeable future, especially after the Armenian defeat of the Azeri military in 1994. As far as Israeli is concerned Armenia is one of Iran's closest partners; it is also probably a "loophole" for Iran's acquisition of prohibited weapons and technologies from several former Soviet republics.

Conclusion

Among the hurdles for Israeli-Azeri relations may be the "Turkish issue." In the past all appeared simple, as Turkey was Azerbaijan's closest ally and Israel's strategic partner. In the last few years, however, the situation has become significantly complicated by Turkish Islamization. Israel is presently interested in Azerbaijan's independence from any Turkish influence.

Israel and Azerbaijan stand to benefit greatly from even stronger ties. From the Israeli point of view there is serious potential for expanding economic ties, if only because Baku sells oil to Israel and is already a client of the Israeli hi-tech and military industries. Israel's drone planes are presently as much in demand in Azerbaijan as they are elsewhere. Israel also sells its Azeri partner armored troop carriers, multiple rocket launchers, Tavor rifles, and ammunition. However, since neither country has enough friends beyond its borders, it should be clear that each partner may contribute to much-required foreign lobbying for the sake of the other. Azerbaijan could be a positive influence in Turkey, while Israel might prove equally helpful in lobbying for the Azeris in the EU and the US. Though further cooperation between Jerusalem and Baku will depend on geopolitical developments, Israel would do well to capitalize on the opportunity.

Dr. Anna Geifman is a senior research fellow in the Department of Political Studies at Bar-Ilan University and Professor Emerita at Boston University. Dima Course is a PhD candidate in political studies at Bar-Ilan University.