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The Ties Between Israel and Azerbaijan

Alexander Murinson



Mideast Security and Policy Studies No. 110

**THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES
BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY**

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© The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies
Bar-Ilan University
Ramat Gan 5290002 Israel
Tel. 972-3-5318959
Fax. 972-3-5359195

besa.center@mail.biu.ac.il
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The Ties between Israel and Azerbaijan

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The Ties between Israel and Azerbaijan

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since gaining independence in 1991, Azerbaijan has emerged as one of Israel's closest friends in the Muslim world. Although Turkey remains Azerbaijan's closest ally, the deterioration in Israeli-Turkish relations has not changed Israel's relationship with the energy rich and strategically located Azerbaijan.

Over the last twenty years, the ties between Israel and Azerbaijan have improved drastically. Israel's interest in receiving reliable oil supplies from Azerbaijan, a strategically important supplier of oil, is a major factor in Azerbaijani-Israeli relations. Similarly, Israel serves as an important supplier of advanced weapon systems to Azerbaijan and an advocate in Washington. In the foreseeable future, it is likely that Azerbaijani-Israeli relations will only increase in areas such as scientific cooperation, information technology, medicine, water purification, agriculture and cultural exchanges. More importantly, strategic cooperation in defense and intelligence fields, as well as in the fight against terror, has proven that two small countries located in an expanded Middle East, have found the unique blend for a successful symbiotic relationship in a highly insecure environment.

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INTRODUCTION

After gaining independence in 1991, Azerbaijan emerged as one of Israel's closest friends in the Muslim world. Furthermore, Azerbaijan arose as the key pillar of Israeli cooperation in the South Caucasus and the geopolitical isthmus which allowed for the realization of the vision of a new "Turkic world" commonwealth that would prevent the Iranian penetration of Central Asia.

Since its establishment, Israel always sought allies among Muslim nations, in order to buttress its international legitimacy and to dilute the religious dimension in the Arab-Israeli conflict. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Israel's foreign policy options expanded. Israel made a decision to engage in deeper relationships with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries, in particular with Azerbaijan. After its independence, Azerbaijan chose Turkey as its strategic partner. Consequently, this Turkish-Azerbaijani axis had a significant impact on Israel's relationship with Azerbaijan, with the three countries sharing similar security threats and geo-strategic perceptions.¹ However, since the deterioration in the Israeli-Turkish partnership, particularly after the *Mavi Marmara* incident on May 31, 2010, the importance of a relationship with such an energy-rich and strategically-located country as Azerbaijan has become more important for Israeli foreign policy. Israel's Foreign Minister, Avigdor Lieberman, quipped during his visit to Baku in April 2012: "Azerbaijan is more important for Israel than France."²

Alexander Murinson (Ph.D. University of London) is a senior researcher at the BESA Center. He is an expert in energy politics and international security, specializing in Azerbaijan, Turkey, Iran and Russia. Murinson is also a senior analyst at Wikistrat.

The end of the Cold War was an important factor that contributed to the formation of the Israeli-Azerbaijani entente. The memory of the historic good ties between the Jewish Community and the Azerbaijani majority was an important psychological element that added legitimacy and continuity to the upgraded Israeli-Azerbaijani relations.³

In the aftermath of the Cold War, the Arab anti-Western forces were weakened by the collapse of the Soviet Union, their main backer. While the United States was engaged in a re-assessment of its strategic position in the neighborhood, Israel needed to find a new role in the quickly-changing geopolitical landscape and to re-affirm its alliance with the United States and other Western countries. One of the challenges for the West was to ensure that a new geopolitical vacuum in the southern periphery of Russia would not be filled with radical Islamic tendencies emanating from the Islamic Republic of Iran, or be re-absorbed into a revamped Russian Empire. The Israeli leadership communicated to America that it was willing to engage with the post-Soviet states and to provide development, and if necessary military aid, to smoothen the transition into a new regional order, free from Russian control.

Seeking partners in the Caucasus region, the Jewish state found a willing partner in the Republic of Azerbaijan, a small, pro-Western, secular new state perched between two former Imperial masters (Russia and Persia). Azerbaijan was also desperate and intent upon breaking out of its diplomatic isolation, an atavistic survival of pro-Armenian sympathies among the majority of Western Christian nations. Israel extended its recognition of the republic of Azerbaijan on December 25, 1991.⁴ Diplomatic relations between the two states were established on April 6, 1992, when Azerbaijan was involved in a bloody conflict over the fate of the Nagorno-Karabakh region. In April 1993, in response to the Armenian occupation of Azeri lands, Turkey closed its border with Armenia. Israel supported the Azeri side in this conflict by supplying Stinger missiles to Azerbaijani troops during the war.⁵ Thus Azerbaijan, seeking to enhance its deterrence, joined the entente between the two regional powers, Israel and Turkey.

Over the last twenty years, the relationship between Azerbaijan and Israel has developed and changed. Nonetheless, the core common “realist”

interests persist, namely balancing Russia and Iran as the main challengers to Western interests in the region, and preventing the realization of the revanchist imperial policies vis-à-vis Azerbaijan, which boosts the value of both countries in the eyes of the West and the US in particular. There are several other strategic factors that have kept Israel and Azerbaijan together for more than twenty years. One factor is an Israeli interest in receiving reliable oil supplies from the Caspian region, where Azerbaijan functions not only as an important supplier of oil to the West and Israel, but also as an important transportation link. With the implementation of an international energy project, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, Azerbaijan has become a significant oil and gas producer and the share of Azerbaijani oil shipped to Israel has steadily increased. The BP-operated pipeline, which began exporting in July 2006, has a capacity of 1.0 million bbl/d. For Israel, the oil transported via the BTC is strategically important. Since 2009, when BTC reached its full capacity, the share of Azerbaijani oil shipped to Israel has steadily increased.⁶

Another strategic factor is the role Israel serves as one of the important suppliers of advanced weapon systems to Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan also needs Israel's support in harnessing the American Jewish lobby in the US Congress to promote a friendly foreign policy towards Azerbaijan.

This paper attempts to answer the following questions: Why did these two countries form an entente in the aftermath of the Cold War? What were the core commonalities and strategic perceptions that brought these countries together? Which security needs are fulfilled by this entente?

Initially, this paper defines key terms, presents the core argument and discusses the roots of the alliance. Subsequently, the paper explains the concept of the Periphery Alliance and Israel's framing of its foreign policy towards Azerbaijan after the Cold War. It also describes the American dimensions in the bilateral relations and the role ethnic communities, specifically the Jewish lobby in the United States, came to play in this entente. The impact of Turkey and Israel on shifting the geopolitical landscape after the 2008 War in the South Caucasus will also be discussed. The last section will deal with the military and security ties. The conclusion provides an assessment of possible developments in this bilateral relationship.

THE CORE ARGUMENT

After the end of the Cold War, Israel re-examined the global situation and applied its Periphery doctrine towards Azerbaijan. The relationship between Israel and Azerbaijan may be described as “strategic” due to the unique strategic functions each country achieves for one another and the great complementarity in the strategic perceptions of both countries. In the 1990s, the relationship was indicative of the new role Israel sought to assume in an American post-Cold War strategy.

Israel saw a great opportunity to expand its circle of friends among Turkic-speaking states using its close ties with Turkey – the self-proclaimed leader of the Turkic world.⁷ But the relationship between Israel and Azerbaijan quickly matured and acquired a life of its own. Israel needed an ally in a geographically-important area that controlled not only the northern border of its most outspoken enemy, the Islamic Republic of Iran, but also the transportation corridor to a resource-rich Central Asia. Israel endeavored to become an asset in the American global post-Cold War strategy in Eurasia and this relationship added value to Israel as an ally in the eyes of the United States, as mentioned above. Azerbaijani leadership on its part sought an ally for its energy-rich republic that would provide it with advanced weapons systems, securing its position as the most powerful country in the South Caucasus.

The Georgian-Russian War of August 2008, launched by Russia against Georgia, changed the geopolitical balance in the periphery of Europe. The war and its outcome directly affected Western interests: Turkey wanted to create a Cordon Sanitaire around the Caucasus and align its policy closer to the Russian position.⁸ The re-establishment of a Russian sphere of influence in the South Caucasus directly threatened the reliability of the energy transportation corridor that hitherto by-passed Russia to the West. Due to its heightened threat perception, Azerbaijan sought to increase its power standing in the region and thus the Israeli military industry found a willing customer in this country in the South Caucasus. Azerbaijan’s role as the critical actor in energy transportation from the Caspian was questioned in the West, but Israel offered aid and re-affirmed its commitment to Azerbaijan’s position in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and continued strengthening its military power.

The study of alliances has a long and illustrious history in the field of International Relations. Stephen Walt, in his classical work on alliances, defined the term entente or axis as an informal alliance based on a constellation of strategic, economic and political shared interests between two or more states.⁹

In the case of the Israel-Azerbaijan alliance, both states seek absolute gains in their military superiority within their respective regional systems.¹⁰ Israel feels the isolation and the threat of the Middle East. Azerbaijan shares this sense of threat and perception of fragility towards the Caucasus' powerful neighbours, due to its hydrocarbon riches and the unresolved status of the Caspian Sea.¹¹

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE POST-SOVIET STATES: ISRAEL'S NEW PERIPHERY DOCTRINE

In the late 1950s, Israel began the implementation of a strategy of alliance formation among the 'non-Arab' periphery (primarily Iran, Turkey and Ethiopia) against the Arab centre. The essential nature of this relationship was best summarized in a secret letter by David Ben-Gurion, Israel's founder, to American President Dwight Eisenhower dated July 24, 1958. Prime Minister Ben-Gurion wrote: "Our object is the creation of a group of countries, not necessarily in formal and public alliance, which by mutual assistance, and joint efforts, in political, economic and other fields, will be able to stand up steadfastly against Soviet Expansion through Nasser, and which might even be able to save the freedom of Lebanon and perhaps, in the course of time, of Syria too."¹² Within this framework, a cooperation agreement was signed in August 1958 between the Mossad (Israeli Intelligence Agency) and its Turkish counterpart, MIT (Milli Istihbarat Teskilati, National Intelligence Organization). Later, through the mediation of Mossad director Reuven Shiloah, the Iranian SAVAK, the Persian acronym for "the Royal Organization for Security and Intelligence," joined the collaboration. The tripartite agreement, named Trident, or "Ultra-Watt," was sealed in August 1958.¹³

In the post-Cold War period, Israel was compelled by changes in the international environment to seek new allies and to re-invent itself by finding a new role in the American global strategy. Israel sought to build its new alliances in areas that included the South Caucasus and Central Asia against its new enemy – the Islamic regime in Iran, and was successful in establishing good relations with Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. In this strategy, Israel pursued the advancement of the shared interests with the United States regarding the Newly Independent Muslim states (preventing the penetration of radical Islam, nuclear proliferation and ensuring the energy security of the West.) In the 1990s, Israel desired to serve as a ‘subcontractor’ when the United States sought to outsource the conduct of its foreign policy in these regions. Thus, in the early 2000s, Israel pursued a policy of advancing bilateral ties with the above-mentioned countries.

ISRAELI-AZERBAIJANI DIPLOMATIC TIES: RESPECT FOR MUTUAL SENSITIVITIES

Since the establishment of Israeli-Azerbaijani diplomatic relations on April 7, 1992, many diplomatic and political exchanges followed.¹⁴ An Israeli embassy was opened in Baku in 1993. While Azerbaijan declined to open a diplomatic mission in Israel, the Azerbaijani authorities would always explain this diplomatic imbalance by referring to “political constraints.” Azerbaijan pointed out “its complicated geopolitical situation, particularly its proximity to Iran, as well as its membership in international Islamic organizations” (such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation [OIC]), as the reason preventing it from opening a mission in Israel.¹⁵ Israel demonstrated understanding to Azeri sensitivities, while pursuing multi-level cooperation with this Muslim republic, including security, military procurement, energy, telecommunications, medicine, trade, education and culture. Israel hoped that Azerbaijan would eventually change their position on this matter.

In the meantime, Azerbaijan established an unofficial channel for government-to-government communication via the representational offices of AZAL (the Azerbaijani National Airline) in Israel.¹⁶ In

1992, a society for Azerbaijani-Israeli cultural ties was established in Baku, named in abbreviation AZIZ, (“my dear” in Azeri), for the revival of Jewish identity in Azerbaijan. After significant numbers of Jews immigrated to Israel from Azerbaijan in the 1990s, this society transformed into the International Association of Azerbaijani-Israeli Friendship, based in Israel.¹⁷ AZIZ, funded by the Azerbaijani Heydar Aliyev Foundation, and supported by the Azerbaijani government, is engaged in joint civic and cultural activities, as well as lobbying on the behalf of Azerbaijan in Israel.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made a short stop-over visit to Baku on August 29, 1997, which marked the strengthening of the bilateral relations on the part of both Israel and Azerbaijan. During this visit, President Heydar Aliyev and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu outlined the areas for future cooperation such as energy, science, technology, agriculture, medicine trade and telecommunications, and exchanged views on regional developments. Between 1999 and 2014, twenty-eight diplomatic and official state exchange visits took place between the two countries. These visits included official representatives in such areas as agriculture, economic development, medicine, transport and tourism. The visit by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to Baku on February 15, 2010, confirmed the importance of the bilateral ties to Israel.

This burgeoning relationship has developed rapidly. According to a former chief foreign policy advisor to President Heydar Aliyev, Vufa Guluzade, the mutual sympathy has a historical basis. The Azerbaijani leadership always took a pre-eminent role in the condemnation of any manifestation of anti-Semitism in the post-Soviet sphere. President Heydar Aliyev stressed the historical nature of Azerbaijani-Israeli amity in his diplomacy. In a speech addressed to Israeli diplomats, Heydar Aliyev said, “The friendship between Azerbaijan and Israel has deep roots. For centuries Jews lived continuously in Azerbaijan as equal citizens. Azerbaijanis never considered them foreigners.”¹⁸ In October 2001, Aliyev made a pledge to open an embassy in Israel, but this has not yet materialized. Over the years, there have been repeated promises by Azerbaijani governments to follow through.

The Azerbaijani-Israeli relationship has consisted, of bilateral political consultations and ad hoc security dialogues. These ad hoc consultations took place during the visits to Israel by Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan, Araz Azimov, in March 2005, and a visit by Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Strategic Affairs of Israel, Avigdor Lieberman, to Azerbaijan in August 2007, as well as during another of Lieberman's visits in the capacity of Minister of Foreign Affairs in April 2012. The state visit in June 2009 by President Shimon Peres to Baku, highlighted the upward trajectory of this relationship and its high political significance for Israel.

The same cannot be said about Israel's relations with Armenia and Georgia, Azerbaijan's neighbors in the South Caucasus. Peres' visit served as a confirmation of the Azerbaijani-Israeli friendship and sent a clear message to neighboring Iran, negating the assertions of leaders of fanatical Islamic groups like Al-Qaeda, which sponsor international terrorism, that Jews and Muslims cannot cooperate and are doomed to perpetual conflict. In the exclusive interview granted to the Azerbaijani news agency *Trend News*, Peres said: "A lot of things unite us... Azerbaijan manifested tolerance and respect for that place where Jews, Muslims and Christians can live without hatred and fanaticism. That is why [Azerbaijan] for me is a special country which I can trust." Peres also emphasized the desire of the Israeli leadership to share technological and scientific assets with Azerbaijan. He continued his interview by saying that: "Israel does not possess significant territory, water, natural gas or petroleum. That is why we have to rely on our brainpower and our science. We must share everything that we possess with Azerbaijan in the areas of common interest."¹⁹

This visit represented the consummation of the main trend in Azerbaijani-Israeli diplomatic relations for deepening and expanding bilateral cooperation in economic, agricultural, scientific and military affairs. The Israeli leader was accompanied by Trade and Labor Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, National Infrastructure Minister Uzi Landau, the Director-General of the Defense Ministry, top executives from Israel's Military Industries and 60 Israeli business people seeking to tighten trade and economic ties with the two Caspian Sea states: Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan.

As a further sign of the deepening relationship between Baku and Jerusalem, both countries cooperated on issues of energy security and the safe transportation of petrochemicals. Among other issues, energy security occupied the pride of place. The plans for the construction of pipelines for the delivery of Azerbaijani natural gas to Israel via Georgia and Turkey were discussed. Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, in his former capacity as Infrastructure Minister, was directly involved in previous negotiations on all aspects of cooperation in energy and water management fields. Peres remarked that after bringing such a large delegation to Baku, “there is a growing necessity of opening an embassy in Israel.”²⁰

Israel’s diplomatic *tour de force* was even more striking in the context of the regional tension emanating from Iran. Prior to Peres’ visit, the Iranian leadership resorted to arm-twisting tactics in order to force Azerbaijan to cancel the visit from Israel. The Iranian Chief of Staff, Hasan Firuzabadi, came to Baku two weeks before Shimon Peres for this purpose. According to Azerbaijani MP Gudrat Gasanguliev, the Iranian media fanned hysteria during the days of the visit and claimed that there were mass rallies in Azerbaijan to protest the visit.²¹

Israeli minister, Uzi Landau, has made two visits to Baku since 2009. In his former capacity as Minister of National Infrastructure, he met Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov, Minister of Industry and Energy Natig Aliyev and the President of the state oil company, SOCAR, Rovnag Abdullayev, on November 10, 2011. Both sides discussed, in particular, the issues related to the delivery of Caspian oil to Israel and Israel’s prospects for the development of its own oil and natural gas fields.²² Israel is in the process of establishing a national fund following the model of the Azerbaijani State Oil Fund. As the Israeli ambassador to Azerbaijan, Rafael Harpaz, observed: “It is imperative [for Israel] to study Azerbaijan’s experience in this area. We do not have any experience in the field of energy.”²³

A diplomatic crisis in the bilateral relations emerged at the end of April 2012. An article claiming that Israel bought “the basing rights” in Azerbaijan for the Israeli air force, in case of an Israeli strike against the nuclear site built by the Iranian regime, created an international furor and further increased tensions between Azerbaijan and Iran.²⁴ However, the

tension abated as result of the successful visit by Israeli Foreign Minister Lieberman to Azerbaijan on April 23, 2012. The visit was intended to “calm down a storm in the teacup that resulted from this unfortunate journalistic canard intended to sow seeds of mutual suspicions between the friendly nations and raised the ire of the Iranians, who are already furious at Azerbaijan’s ‘hutzpah’ to wield such close ties with the Jewish state.”²⁵ Consequently, the Azerbaijani leadership welcomed further expansion not only of political and strategic cooperation, but signed agreements with the top Israeli diplomats, to enhance the people-to-people contacts between the two countries in such areas as tourism, medium and small business trade and investments, and cultural and educational exchanges.

In December 2013, Azerbaijan and Israel established a new forum for cooperation called the Israel-Azerbaijan Development Dialogue within the OECD-backed Busan Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation.²⁶ This was led by the Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov’s trip to Israel on April 21-24, 2013, marking a prominent visit of a high-level delegation to Israel from a Muslim country.²⁷ Mammadyarov arrived in Israel for meetings with the Israeli leadership, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Shimon Peres. The Azerbaijani Foreign Minister also met Israeli businessmen and Azerbaijani-Israeli community leaders. During the visit, they discussed the future of bilateral relations and on April 26, 2013, Mammadyarov asserted once again that “Negotiations (are) underway to open an embassy in Israel.”²⁸ In May 2014, Foreign Minister Lieberman visited Azerbaijan to consolidate these bilateral relations and to “compare notes” on regional issues. In order to institutionalize the diplomatic exchange in view of the absence of an embassy in Israel, the respective Ministers of Foreign Affairs signed a protocol on the “Regular diplomatic consultations between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the State of Israel.”²⁹ Highlighting the breadth of cooperation in defense and security sectors, the Israeli Foreign Minister met with the Azerbaijani Vice-President and all ministers representing the important ministries such as defense, national security, emergency and civil defense, as well the minister for the diaspora affairs.

The Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon's working visit to Baku on September 10-12, 2014 served as a proof of the high level of coordination in military affairs between the two countries.³⁰ It was the first such visit by an Israeli Defense Minister in twenty-two years in the region. Moshe Ya'alon had meetings with the Azerbaijani top officials, including President Ilham Aliyev, Foreign Minister Elmar Mamadyarov and Minister of Defense Zakir Hasanov. During the meeting with President Aliyev on September 10, 2014, Ya'alon confirmed that bilateral ties are "fruitful". The Israeli Defense Minister emphasized "the two countries were engaged in broad-based strategic cooperation."³¹ The visit coincided with the first military industry ADEX 2014 exhibition, where the Israeli Defense Minister opened an Israeli pavilion.

THE AMERICAN DIMENSION

By joining the entente with Israel, Azerbaijan hoped to acquire an important ally in the American political process - the 'Jewish lobby'. Ethnic lobbies have come to play an increasingly important role in American policy-making, such as the Armenian, Greek, Jewish and Indian lobbies. The pluralistic and open system of the American government allows access for special interest groups in the domain of high politics, such as security and foreign policy. Starting in 1997, the Jewish advocacy coalition (comprising of a number of Jewish organizations such as American Jewish Committee, American Jewish Congress, Anti-Defamation League, Central Agency for Jewish Education, Hadassah and others) made a consistent lobbying effort to support an important piece of legislation which directly affected the future of the newly independent republics of the Caucasus and Central Asia. This legislation, passed in 1999 by the U.S. House of Representatives, was called the Silk Road Strategy. Its objective was to promote independence, stability and the rule of law in the South Caucasus. This legislation allowed for the specific funding of Israeli projects in economic development activities in areas of agriculture, health and other fields.³² An analysis of the interventions of major American Jewish organizations on behalf of Azerbaijan reveals that there is an association of interest between Azerbaijan and the US.

The coalition of Jewish organizations wrote a letter of support to Senator Sam Brownback on June 29, 1999. In this letter the American Jewish organizations provided three reasons for their support for the Silk Road Bill legislation:

Much of the region enjoys significant petroleum and natural gas reserves. Accordingly, both the U.S. and Israel stand to reap enormous dividends through investing in pipelines through these lands to Turkey. Reducing the dependence on Persian Gulf oil would benefit both countries' national security interests and help their consumers. Furthermore, Israel, which enjoys a burgeoning strategic and economic relationship with Turkey, is interested in solidifying additional relationships with moderate Muslim governments that are wary of Iranian and Russian ambitions.... As noted above, Iran continues to work hard to bring the nations in the region into its sphere of influence. Similarly, Russia still seeks to exert control over the region it once controlled when it was the Soviet Union. The reactionary Taliban forces in Afghanistan threaten the stability of the nations of Central Asia.³³

The Jewish advocacy coalition serves as an essential pillar in this relationship between Azerbaijan and the US.³⁴ This role is appreciated by the ruling elite in Azerbaijan. Indeed, it appears that access to the Jewish lobby in the United States was one of the reasons for creating an axis with Israel.

Systemic shifts occurring at the end of the Cold war prompted the formation of policy communities in the United States, some of which supported and others which opposed the creation of the entente between Israel and Azerbaijan. Among them, the Jewish organizations have been the most active in promoting the strategic partnership between Israel and Azerbaijan.³⁵ Since 1997, AIPAC was involved in a public campaign on issues related to the energy security of Turkey and delivery routes for Caspian oil and gas to the West. AIPAC favoured the creation of the East-West energy corridor, which includes the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline (BTC) and the South Caucasus gas pipeline. B'nai Brith was very active in promoting the BTC pipeline project in American foreign policy circles.³⁶

This advocacy coalition ultimately tried to institutionalize this relationship and convince the American government about its strategic importance.³⁷ Similarly, Azerbaijan has been conducting a long-term policy of establishing links with Jewish networks in Washington. As noted by one observer: “Azerbaijani political elites consider Israeli and Jewish support a key element in countering the Armenian diaspora, particularly in the United States and Europe.”³⁸

MILITARY AND SECURITY COOPERATION: NAVIGATING DANGEROUS WATERS TOGETHER

The military/security track occupies a significant part in the Azerbaijan-Israel bilateral relationship. The frequency and intensity of visits by senior representatives of the Israeli Defense ministry and regular visits by former Deputy Defense Minister Efraim Sneh and Defense Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer corroborates this point.³⁹ Over the last 20 years, Azerbaijan and Israel expanded their burgeoning ties to include cooperation in the military and security fields and the exchange of intelligence information. Azerbaijan and Israel also embraced cooperation in anti-terrorist struggle and border security. Israeli intelligence operatives participated in collecting human intelligence about extremist Islamist organizations in the region and monitoring the troop deployments of Azerbaijan’s neighbors – especially Iran.⁴⁰

As aforementioned, Azerbaijan’s strategic partnership with Israel is a source of concern for Iran. In order to impair this relationship, the Iranian regime conducts a campaign of infiltrating Azerbaijan and targeting Jewish and Israeli-sponsored commercial and cultural sites to create a perception in Azerbaijani society that the relations with Israel impede domestic security.

In 2008, Azerbaijani authorities, with the aid of Israeli intelligence services, thwarted a terrorist attack, involving members of a Hezbollah cell.⁴¹ According to Azerbaijani media outlets, six individuals were charged with planning attacks on several strategic sites in Azerbaijan that included the Gabala anti-missile radar station (the largest anti-

missile defense installation in the South Caucasus) and the Israeli embassy in Baku on July 4, 2008. During the investigation it was revealed that Lebanese citizens, who had previous links with the Al-Qaeda and Hezbollah terrorist networks, were the leaders of the terrorist cell arrested in Azerbaijan. It also surfaced during the trial, that it was the Sepah-e Pasdaran, the notorious Corps of Guardians of the Islamic revolution, who ran this secret cell that was also planning to infiltrate the Azerbaijani-Iranian border. In the 1990s, Israelis constructed stations for electronic intelligence (ELINT) along the Azerbaijani-Iranian borders.⁴² In 2011, Israel started supplying Azerbaijan with drones to monitor this border.⁴³

The most recent series of planned terrorist attacks by an Iran-supported cells occurred in March 2012, when Azerbaijan arrested 22 suspects in a plot to attack the Israeli and US embassies in Baku. The Azerbaijani MNB (National Security Ministry) announced that three of the arrested men received smuggled arms and equipment from Iranian agents. Other plots included an assassination attempt on President Ilham Aliyev in April 2012, as well as attacks on religious pilgrimage sites and police stations. In one case, as a result of an anti-terrorist operation in the end of May 2012, the Azerbaijani security services arrested 40 suspects and seized their weapons. These arrests thwarted a series of planned terror attacks against the Eurovision Song Contest which was scheduled to be held in Baku that month. Azerbaijan's officials said they had discovered 13 assault rifles, a machine gun, 12 handguns, three rifles, 3,400 rounds of bullets, 62 hand grenades, and several kilograms of explosives. Azerbaijan's National Security Ministry concluded that Iran's Revolutionary Guards were behind the plot. The successful anti-terrorist operations serve as another example of the cooperation between Israeli security forces and the Azerbaijani MNB in identifying and combating terrorist threats in Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan employs Israeli security companies for providing services of a sensitive nature. In 2001, the Israeli firm, Magal Systems, was granted a contract to construct a security fence for Baku's Bina airport, one of Azerbaijan's key strategic assets, and to train its security personnel.⁴⁴ In 2004, Turkey and Israel conducted negotiations on a joint venture for upgrading Soviet-origin equipment in Azerbaijan's military.⁴⁵ But a

major power balance shift in the Caucasus occurred as the result of the Russian-Georgian war of August 2008.⁴⁶ Many traditional partners of Azerbaijan in the military field (Turkey, the EU, Belarus and Ukraine), drew their own conclusions about their immediate interests in the region and demonstrated restraint in the further militarization of the region in view of Russia's threatening posture. Azerbaijan eventually granted a 56 million dollar contract to Israel's Elbit Systems to upgrade its T-72 tank fleet instead of Turkey's ASELSAN.⁴⁷ Azerbaijan's major financial inflows, as a result of its international standing as a rising economic and petrochemical power, led to its desire to change the military balance in its favor in the conflict over the Armenian-occupied territories and to signal to Iran its determination to stand against any attempts to destabilize the situation. Accordingly, a significant part of the Azerbaijani state budget is assigned for the defense sector and the purchase of new weapons and military equipment.

While Turkey, Azerbaijan's most reliable ally, under Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, started implementing its "zero problems with neighbors" foreign policy in 2009, Azerbaijan also experienced strategic uncertainty as Turkey began shifting its position vis-a-vis Armenia, whose forces continue the occupation of the Azerbaijani territory, Nagorno Karabakh. Armenia, as a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, has security guarantees from Russia.⁴⁸ Since 2002, Russia has been using Armenia to project its power in the South Caucasus region. In an interesting tit-for-tat, the U.S. government granted Azerbaijan \$4.4 million in foreign military financing grants for the purchase of American-made weapons.⁴⁹ The unresolved conflict in the Nagorno-Karabakh region has compelled Azerbaijan to seek to build a military deterrent, if not a military superiority in the South Caucasus. This task has become a clear priority for Azerbaijan's government in recent years, as evident by an unprecedented increase in military spending. From 2010 to 2011, military expenditures of Azerbaijan increased from \$1.59 billion (3.95% of GDP) to \$3.1 billion (6.2% of GDP). In addition to direct military expenditures, in 2011, \$1.36 billion was spent on the needs of the defense industry, bringing the total cost of the defense budget and defense industry to \$ 4.46 billion, or 8.9% of the GDP.⁵⁰ In 2012, Azerbaijan's military expenditure showed a modest growth of 1.2% and reached

\$1.77 billion.⁵¹ In 2013, military expenditure reached \$1.9 billion with a growth of 0.9%.⁵² These military budget figures are very impressive, and not only for countries in the Commonwealth of Independent States. The International Peace Research Institute reported that Azerbaijan outpaced most countries of the world in military spending, registering a 493 percent increase from 2004 to 2014.⁵³

During Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman's visit to Azerbaijan on April 23, 2012, he not only expressed a desire to maintain intimate and deep relations with Azerbaijan, but also re-affirmed the Israeli commitment to Azerbaijan's security by providing cutting-edge technology, such as drones, while Russia's main supplier of armaments to Armenia was still in the early stages of manufacturing drones, which have a qualitative edge in modern warfare. In the meantime, the total amount of Israeli military sales to Azerbaijan runs in the "hundreds of millions of dollars."⁵⁴ Despite the reported Russian appeals to Israel to suspend further military technology transfers to Azerbaijan, the Israeli foreign ministry officials announced that there would be no "changes in the agreement."⁵⁵ In June 2014, the Head of the Department of Central Europe in the Israeli Foreign Ministry Anna Azari, who arrived in Yerevan, Armenia, for diplomatic consultations, announced that despite the dissatisfaction of Armenia, Israel will continue its arms sales to Baku.⁵⁶

Israeli Tadiran Communications, which manufactures electronic equipment for military use, started supplying communication devices to Azerbaijan, and Israel Military Industries (IMI), which produces weapons systems, munitions and missile weapons for the armed forces of Israel, sold Baku a wide range of missiles and guidance systems.⁵⁷ However, most interactions in security, military and intelligence fields are kept out of the public eye. This relationship is also marked by a pragmatic recognition by Israel of Azerbaijan's political need to tow the OIC's general line publicly and in international forums.⁵⁸

Israel also supplied Azerbaijan with advanced weapons systems that increased Azerbaijan's military capabilities and positively affected the regional military balance in view of the continued Armenian occupation. This fact is relevant to the balance of power in the South Caucasus in

the aftermath of the 2008 Russian-Georgian war. The Israeli authorities stopped supplying Georgia with drones and attack military equipment to prevent an increase in geopolitical tensions with Russia in August 2008. At the same time, Israeli military aid to Azerbaijan increased. Azerbaijan has received many defensive and offensive weapons from Israel: 6 Lynx self-propelled MRL, 50 SSM for Lynx self-propelled MRL, 4 Aerostar UAVs, 5 ATMOS-2000 155 mm self-propelled guns, 5 CARDOM 120mm self-propelled mortars, 10 Hermes-450 UAVs, 100 Spike-MR/LR Anti-tank missiles, and 10 Sufa APVs.⁵⁹ In 2012, Azerbaijan acquired Israeli anti-ship Gabriel-5 missiles with a range of 300km. As it is known that a landlocked Armenia does not possess a navy, this acquisition is a source of concern for one country – Iran. According to the Azerbaijani Turan news agency, Azerbaijan would use these to protect its coastline on the Caspian Sea from the growing number of Iranian warships deployed in the area.⁶⁰ Iran’s reaction to this was a warning to Azerbaijan that this weapon undermines the balance of power in the Caspian Sea. Iranian Navy Commander Rear Admiral Habibollah Sayyari noted that Iran “is not heedless of the issue and is monitoring the situation.”⁶¹

In the meantime, the military balance in the region has been changing, as Iran is completing two new frigates of Moudge class to be stationed in the Caspian Sea. These frigates, the Jamaran-2 (77) and the Sahand, are equipped with a helicopter flight deck, four Chinese C-802 surface-to-surface missiles and Standard Missile 1 (RIM-66) anti-air missiles, as well as torpedoes.⁶² In June 2013, an Iranian naval delegation, which included “two indigenously-built missile-launching warships,” visited the Russian port of Astrakhan on the Caspian.⁶³ The two boats were likely to be Sina Class missile boats, although it is possible that one of them is one of Iran’s two Moudge class frigates, which was reportedly stationed in the Caspian Sea. During this visit, Russian and Iranian navies agreed to conduct a joint naval exercise in the Caspian basin in the second half of 2013.⁶⁴ In order to further strengthen its maritime security, according to a military information blog *Istiglal*, Azerbaijan completed assembling the two high-speed border patrol 3rd Class Shaldag MK V boats under licensing from the Israel Shipyards company in July 2014.⁶⁵ Azerbaijan is also in the process of negotiating a purchase of Israeli Saar 4.5 missile boats.⁶⁶

As an illustration of the deep cooperation between Israel and Azerbaijan in the military industrial field, the Government of Azerbaijan, through its Ministry of Defense Industries, has created a joint venture with an Israeli company, Aeronautics Defense Systems, to produce UAVs, currently being manufactured and assembled by the Baku-based Azad Systems Company in Azerbaijan.⁶⁷ This venture has a 51% Azerbaijan ownership. Production of Israeli drones commenced in Azerbaijan by Azad Systems in March 2011. By the end of 2012, the Azerbaijani Armed Forces were supplied with 60 UAVs of Aerostar and Orbiter-2M classes.⁶⁸ In April 2011, Israel Aeronautics Industries (IAI) also offered to sell to Azerbaijan one of the best UAV systems in the world, Heron and Searcher Mk II. In February 2012, an Israeli military concern, IAI, opened a course for training UAV operators and invited Azerbaijani military staff to join.⁶⁹ In June of 2013, Azerbaijan showcased its military advantage to its regional rivals, Armenia and Iran, by publicly demonstrating its new locally-produced UAVs, as well as the Israeli-manufactured Hermes and Heron UAVs during a military parade.⁷⁰ As another indicator of the continued Azerbaijani-Israeli cooperation, Azerbaijan purchased the EXTRA Israeli tactical missiles during the Israeli military operation in Gaza, “Operation Protective Edge,” in July-August 2014.⁷¹ The test firing of these missiles was broadcast on Azerbaijani national television.⁷²

Azerbaijan also showed great interest in bilateral cooperation in the new field of cyber security, which is a matter of strategic concern for both countries. Heydar Mirza, a leading research fellow at the Center for Strategic Studies (SAM-Baku), concluded: “Taking into account the abundance of critical software in the energy sector of Azerbaijan, particular importance must be paid to cybersecurity. Israeli experience may be extremely useful for Azerbaijan.”⁷³ While the new president of the Azerbaijani-Israeli Chamber of Commerce (AICC) suggested: “Certainly, Azerbaijan, due to its geographic location, military and political realities, is very interested in acquiring technologies from Israel to ensure the security of information (the so-called ‘cyber-security’), and many other innovations offered by the Israeli high-tech.”⁷⁴

ECONOMIC AND CIVILIAN COOPERATION

Israel and Azerbaijan quickly developed active ties in commerce and trade.

In 1994, Bezeq, a major Israeli telecommunications provider, bought a large share of the Azerbaijani telephone operating framework. Since then it has installed phone lines across Azerbaijan, and is operating regional services. Bakcell is a joint venture company between the Ministry of Communications of Azerbaijan and GTIB-Israel, operating since early 1994 as the first cellular phone operator in Azerbaijan.

Many Israeli companies are active in the Azerbaijani energy sector. For example, Modcon Systems Ltd., an Israeli-based supplier of high technology to the oil and gas industries, has a branch in Azerbaijan. However, the level of Israeli exports to Azerbaijan has been moderate. According to the Central Bureau of Statistics of Israel Foreign Trade, in 2010, Azerbaijan occupied the 29th place among Israel's trade partners. At the same time, Israel occupied the second or third place in the foreign trade of Azerbaijan during the period between 2002 and 2010, due to oil exports. The BTC is co-owned by an international consortium and the pipeline system runs 1,100 miles from the Sangachal terminal near Baku, through Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey, to the Mediterranean port of Ceyhan. From there, the oil is shipped by tanker to global markets and Israel buys some of this oil directly or on the spot market and through secondary sales.⁷⁵

*Israeli Non-military Exports to Azerbaijan*⁷⁶

Year	Export Volume
2007	\$82.5 million
2008	\$129.4 million
2009	\$250 million
2010	\$200 million
2011	\$125 million

But Azerbaijani-Israeli ties have a multi-faceted nature. As a further sign of the deepening relationship between Baku and Jerusalem, both countries continue to cooperate on issues of energy security. Currently, Azerbaijan delivers 30% of oil to the Israeli market and high-level officials of both countries have discussed the issues related to the delivery of the Caspian oil to Israel and Israel's prospects for developing its own gas fields.⁷⁷

Azerbaijan has experience in the development and production of hydrocarbons, and Israel plans to involve Azerbaijani specialists in mining projects in the Israeli sector of the Mediterranean Sea. The State Oil Company of Azerbaijan (SOCAR) was planning to supply Israel with the equipment for test drilling on the continental shelf in the Mediterranean at the off shore field "Yam-3." The investor, Shemen Energy, whose chairman is a former Chief of Staff of the Israel Defense Forces, Gaby Ashkenazi, bought its controlling share in July 2012.

That same month, the media reported that the head of the investment department at SOCAR, Vagif Aliyev, confirmed that the Azerbaijani company would not only be supplying equipment, but would also be operating the drilling platforms to participate in the search for mineral deposits off the coast of Israel. As SOCAR's subsidiary, Azerbaijan Caspian Drilling Company Ltd (CDC), invested a 10-percent stake in the Shemen company (formerly Med Ashdod), which drills in Israel's offshore oil field.⁷⁸ The Voice of Israel radio station reported that the first two rigs were due to arrive in Israel from Azerbaijan in September 2012. According to the report, the contract with SOCAR was worth at least \$ 80 million.⁷⁹

Since 2012, Israel has also increased cooperation with Azerbaijan in several innovative fields such as high-technology and medicine. These commercial openings brought into existence the Azerbaijani-Israeli Chamber of Commerce (AICC). Michael Lotem, a former Israeli ambassador to Azerbaijan, proposed this idea for enhancing bilateral trade in the civilian sphere.⁸⁰ AICC came into existence at the end of August 2013. MASHAV, the Israeli Foreign Ministry's arm for economic and scientific cooperation, also provides funds for educational and scientific exchanges between the two countries.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

After the end of the Cold War, the new geostrategic dynamic and competitive international environment, generated by globalization, produced fluctuating zones of influence in Eurasia. Since the 1990s, the United States has been competing with Russia, China and Iran for the status as the guarantor of security and independence of newly independent states in the Caucasus and Central Asia. The need for reliable allies in the region is of critical concern for the United States, which in turn spurred the development of Israeli-Azerbaijani relations. Additionally, Azerbaijan identified Israel as a country with influence in Washington which reinforced its interest in forging a strategic relationship with the Jewish state.

Azerbaijan also sees Israel as a source of sophisticated military hardware, intelligence and security equipment. Israel's relationship with Azerbaijan acquired a special urgency and depth when strategic relations between Turkey and Israel began to quickly unravel after the AKP government declared its "zero problems with neighbors" policy and patched its relations with the regime in Tehran. Israel, as a manufacturer of the most advanced weapons system, certainly was able to provide Azerbaijani armed forces with a qualitative edge in Baku's unstable neighborhood.

As a critical part of the East-West transportation corridor, Azerbaijan vigorously pursued the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, which made the country an integral part of the Western strategy to de-link Europe and Israel of its exclusive dependence on Russian energy resources, thus enhancing Israel's energy security. Yet, despite an erosion of the Turkish position from its earlier security commitments, including the non-negotiable position on the opening of the border with Armenia since 2008, Turkey remains the key ally of Azerbaijan. From a geopolitical viewpoint, Turkey represents the 'lifeline to the West' for Azerbaijan's energy projects. In this context, it is unlikely that any other country, including Israel, can replace Turkey as the closest ally of Azerbaijan. By the same token, Turkey, despite its rhetoric, has not interfered with the relations between Israel and Azerbaijan.⁸¹ In fact, the Azerbaijani senior diplomats sent a signal to the Turkish leadership that Azerbaijan would pursue bilateral cooperation with Israel without any linkage to the status of Turkish-Israeli relations.⁸²

Another important factor that continues to affect Azerbaijani-Israeli relations is Azerbaijan's geostrategic location. Due to its sensitive location at the geopolitical fault line between Europe and Asia, Azerbaijan experiences a pull of many regional powers and global powers, including Russia, Turkey and Iran as well as the United States and the European Union. Azerbaijan is perceived by Iran as one of the prongs of American influence in the Caspian region and a key Israeli ally. Using religious radical cells, Iran has been attempting not only to stir anti-Israeli sentiments among the Azerbaijani population, but also to directly strike at Jewish and Israeli targets in the country.

The Azerbaijani leadership has chosen to conduct a multi-dimensional foreign policy that assures the country's independence in its international orientation. In this context, Azerbaijan made a critical decision to join the Non-Aligned Movement in November 2011. This institutional arrangement allows a maximum of flexibility and maintenance of military neutrality for this South Caucasian country. Since 1994, Azerbaijan has also participated in the NATO Partnership for Peace program that assures that Azerbaijani Armed Forces gain valuable operational experience and are exposed to a contemporary military doctrine.

In the foreseeable future, Israel will continue to play a critical role as a reliable supplier of the latest technology in military and civilian fields to Azerbaijan. As one analyst concluded: "Azerbaijan is considered a favorite destination for the Israeli arms industry, and there are existing partnerships between the military institutions of the state with almost every Israeli defense industry."⁸³

In the meantime, the ties between Azerbaijan and Israel have shown increased intimacy and sensitivity to regional and global concerns of both countries. Cooperation is increasing in many fields such as scientific cooperation, information technology, medicine, water purification, agriculture, and cultural exchange. More importantly, strategic cooperation based on reciprocity, in defense and intelligence fields, as well as the fight against terror, has proven that two small countries located in an expanded Middle East have found the unique blend for a successful symbiotic relationship in a highly insecure environment. The proof of the reliability and longevity of the Azerbaijani-Israeli ties came

at the cusp of the Israeli Operation “Protective Edge” against Hamas in the summer of 2014. When the majority of Muslim states accused Israel of humanitarian crimes and Europe marked a significant spike in anti-Semitism, a Muslim Azerbaijan stood out as a beacon of support born out of the country’s self-interest and commitment to its Western identity. This is not only the official diplomatic line, but widely shared public sentiment. Speaking of Islamic terrorism, an Azerbaijani political activist recently claimed, “Azerbaijanis also need Israel to stay strong against threats coming from Iran and the Middle East.”⁸⁴

NOTES

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⁵ Soner Cagaptay and Alexander Murinson, “Good Relations between Azerbaijan and Israel: A Model for Other Muslim States in Eurasia?” in *Policy Watch* #982, The Washington Institute for the Near East Policy (co-author Soner Cagaptay), March 30, 2005. See also Pierre Rousselin, *Le Figaro*, November 17 1992, *Jerusalem Report*, February 24, 1994.

⁶ Interview with Rauf Mammadov, Director at SOCAR USA Office, June 26, 2014.

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⁸ See the definition of *Cordon Sanitaire* in Harold Fisher, *Famine in Soviet Russia* (New York: Macmillan, 1927), p.25.

⁹ See Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), p.3.

¹⁰ With the end of the Cold War, the neorealist assumptions about the nature of national relations and international security have been increasingly challenged due to an inability to predict or explain structural change in the international system. The neorealist dismissal of the role that ideational, normative, and cultural factors play

in determining foreign policy of states runs counter to the weight attributed to it by the contemporary substantive and theoretical scholarship in international relations.

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¹⁴ Arthur Lenk, “15th Anniversary of Israel-Azerbaijan Diplomatic Relations,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Israel*, April 7, 2007.

¹⁵ Shamkhal Abilov, “Why Azerbaijan Has No Full Diplomatic Relations With Israel,” *The Journal of Turkish Weekly*, 25 December 2008, source: <http://www.turkishweekly.net/op-ed/2437/why-azerbaijan-has-no-full-diplomatic-relations-with-israel.html>.

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¹⁷ Азербайджан, *The World Congress of Russian Jewry*, source: <http://www.wcrj.org/community/detail.php?ID=130>

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