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Israel Needs a Caucasus Strategy

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Israel must maintain its deep historic relationship with Azerbaijan, but the Jewish people also have common bonds with Armenians. Jerusalem must seek a larger role in the region to broker peace and prevent Iran and Turkey from gaining a foothold in the area.

The recent clashes over the disputed Artsakh/Nagorno-Karabakh region in the southern Caucasus are threatening to start a new war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Like many territorial disputes in Africa and the Middle East, this one began with colonial border-drawing and broken promises by the Soviet Empire, the product of Josef Stalin's divide-and-conquer tactics. This has helped make Armenia dependent on Russia for military support, and some of Russia's largest military bases are in that country.

Iran supports Yerevan as well (to a lesser extent) for three main reasons: concern over Azeri separatism at home, Iran's sizeable Armenian community, and Turkish influence in the Caucasus. Meanwhile, Turkey is seeking to increase its own clout in Baku against its historic Armenian enemy while at the same time placing Sunni jihadists on the borders of its Russian and Iranian "frenemies."

All of this bodes ill for Israel and presents the Jewish State with a difficult challenge. The Jews have shared experiences with the Armenians, but Israel's relationship with Baku is important for Jerusalem's regional security. There must, therefore, be a revamped and renewed Caucasus strategy for Israel going into the rest of the 21st century.

The Jewish and Armenian peoples have many commonalities. Both suffered genocidal assault in the 20th century because of their ethnicities and faiths. In 1915, at the height of WWI, Armenian Christians, along with their Assyrian and Greek coreligionists, were massacred in an act of genocide by the Muslim

Ottoman Empire. During WWII, the Jews were victims of genocide inflicted by Nazi Germany. Berlin had a close historical relationship with Ankara, and was even inspired in part by the Ottoman-inflicted genocide to begin the Holocaust.

In addition to their common history of genocide and persecution, Jews and Armenians have also shared many of the same trades for the same reason: they were often restricted to trading or merchant-related jobs due to discrimination in European or Muslim-majority societies.

After long struggles, both peoples finally regained sovereignty over their indigenous homelands, and the conflict over Artsakh/Nagorno-Karabakh is somewhat reminiscent of Israel's conflict with the Palestinians in the West Bank. According to international law, Armenia and Israel are occupying land reserved for Arab Palestinians and ethnic Azeris, respectively. But the lands in question were historically the core of both the Jewish and Armenian civilizations prior to ethnic cleansing campaigns, settlement by foreigners, and divide-and-conquer tactics by colonial powers. Negotiations have resulted in dead ends many times, and violent conflict over both disputed areas is a regular occurrence.

Sadly, history has barred the two nations from what should be a natural alliance. Armenia is cut off from most of the region and is dependent for trade and economic survival on Russia and Iran, two countries that are hardly friends of Israel. Similarly, due to the Arab-Israeli conflict and the "alliance of the periphery," Israel has had a historic alliance with Turkey—Yerevan's arch-nemesis—and refused to recognize the Armenian Genocide.

Yerevan's relations with Iran and Jerusalem's with Turkey have generated an atmosphere of mistrust between the two capitals. Armenia has consistently voted in favor of the Palestinians at the UN, and many Armenians in Arab countries have supported "resistance" against Israel even though Israel is home to an Armenian population.

With Azerbaijan as with Armenia, Jews have historically faced little antisemitism compared to the wider Middle East and the former Soviet Union. Israel has a large Azeri-Jewish population. Although Azerbaijan is a Shiite Muslim dictatorship, it is very secular and quite independent of Turkish foreign policy decisions despite their "brotherly ties." It buys vast quantities of sophisticated weapons from Israel, which in turn receives most of its oil from the Caspian Sea nation.

Azerbaijan, like Israel, views Iran as a geostrategic rival, and reportedly has agreed to allow Israel to use its territory to carry out intelligence operations

and even airstrikes against the Islamic Republic. Baku is concerned about Tehran's expansionist plans, mistreatment of its Azeri minority, support for Armenia, and historical occupation of Azeri land. All of these are perfect reasons for a tight relationship between Baku and Jerusalem—so much so that the dictator of Azerbaijan often goes out of his way to praise the role of the country's Jewish community in Azeri history. While Azerbaijan also votes in favor of the Palestinians in the UN, it does so more to maintain ties with other Muslim countries that might feel uncomfortable with its alliance with Israel than out of any sense of solidarity with Ramallah or Gaza City.

Changing realities in the region necessitate a new Israeli strategy for maintaining ties with Azerbaijan while expanding them with Armenia. It is important for Jerusalem to adopt a more balanced policy in the region, one that cultivates a deeper friendship with Armenia while not abandoning its Baku ally.

Turkey, it is safe to say, has gone from a friend to perhaps Israel's most dangerously sophisticated geopolitical rival. It openly supports Hamas, crushes Israel's Kurdish allies, and seeks to Islamize Azerbaijan by sending Syrian jihadists to fight Armenia on its behalf. Ankara has also encroached upon Israel's economic gas interests in the Mediterranean. It is high time that Jerusalem abandon its apprehension about offending Ankara and recognize the Armenian Genocide.

Doing so could bring the recently appointed Armenian ambassador back to Tel Aviv, who was recalled due to Israeli arms sales to Azerbaijan during the recent round of violence. A distancing of the Ankara-Jerusalem relationship could also lead to a reciprocal draw-down in ties between Yerevan and Tehran.

Israel must also make the moral decision of whether or not to end arms sales to Baku. Now that it has peace with Bahrain and the UAE, it is not nearly as dependent on Azeri oil as it historically has been. Therefore, there is less significant danger of a reciprocal move should Israel halt arms sales, even if such a halt is limited only to rounds of conflict.

The other option is to sell weapons of equal quality and quantity to Armenia in order to create balance, deterrence, and a likelihood of ceasefire. If both countries have equally sophisticated weapons, it is less likely they would be willing to risk a devastating war that could end with no clear winner. If Israel ends up with better relations with both countries, it could play the role of peacemaker between the two sides in such a way that would mitigate or outright block Turkish and Iranian influence in the region. It could also

empower Western allies, such as France and the US, in the region at the expense of Russia.

Jerusalem must not make excuses to abandon morals for strategy; nor must it be so unwise as to do the moral thing at the expense of its own security. It is possible to take a middle ground that would empower the influence of the Jewish State. Having good relations with both Armenia and Azerbaijan necessitates a more even-handed policy to the region.

Either Israel should suspend arms sales to Azerbaijan or it should supply them to Armenia as well to level the playing field. This would probably bring violence to an end and give peace talks a chance. At the same time, Israel must recognize the current Turkish threat and bring about closer relations with the Armenian people, with whom the Jews share many tragic experiences.

After all, Israel's current Mediterranean allies of Cyprus and Greece were once much closer to the Palestinians and Arab countries, partly due to Israel's close ties with their enemy, Turkey. The situation is drastically different today. If Jerusalem is to counter Ankara, it needs as many allies as it can get. And if Israel is to be a light unto the nations, it must set the gold standard when it comes to recognizing and remembering genocide.

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