



Antisemitic Tropes in the Age of Post-Soviet War

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The new round of Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict and the war in Ukraine both exhibit noticeable anti-Jewish aspects. However, their manifestations are not identical.

The Russians are playing the “Jewish card” to ideologically justify their invasion of Ukraine, explaining it as a “fight against the radical nationalist, fascist, and antisemitic regime in Kyiv”. Ukraine, meanwhile, many of whose leaders are of Jewish origin, puts forward a narrative of “the Russian aggression as a new Holocaust,” widely using that language in order to influence international public opinion and bring Israel into the conflict. For its part, Moscow expects Israel to stick to its current policy of offering solely humanitarian, diplomatic, and financial support to Ukraine and to refrain from supplying it with weapons. It also expects Israel not to join any sanctions against Russia.

Both Kyiv and Moscow view the Jewish world as an asset for the achievement of immediate strategic goals. However, antisemitism still exists in both countries, occasionally bursting out in rare cases of hate crime. More often it emerges as hate speech, particularly on social media.

The situation in the South Caucasus is fundamentally different. Antisemitic and anti-Zionist themes can be heard quite clearly in the political discourse of the states in conflict, Azerbaijan and Armenia, but they are promoted entirely by external stakeholders, with the leading role played by the radical Islamist regime of Iran.

The Iranian regime has spent decades declaring that it aspires to “wipe Israel off the map”, as it sees Israel as the main obstacle to the expansion of the Islamic Revolution

and the establishment of Islamist hegemony throughout the Greater Middle East. Antisemitism is a major element of the ideological justification of this strategy. While in the past, official Iranian propaganda has used mainly the constructs of the “new” antisemitism, including criticism of “Zionism as an instrument of Muslim oppression” and denial of the Holocaust, in recent years, classic antisemitic clichés have begun to reemerge. These include accusing Jews of “dual loyalty” (in fact, disloyalty to their countries of residence), the canard that “the Jews rule the world” (as in a recent tweet from the Iranian Embassy in Australia that declared that the Jews have long controlled the US government), and so on.

Such stories, which have proven quite effective in promoting the interests of Iranian Islamists in Muslim countries, have become part of Tehran’s propaganda efforts supporting the regime’s geopolitical activity in the South Caucasus. On the one hand, Tehran is interested in weakening Azerbaijan as much as possible, as Azerbaijan is the Jewish state’s close ally, Israel’s leading oil supplier, and a large-scale buyer of Israeli military and civil technologies. On the other hand, Tehran wants to enhance the dependence on Iran of Armenia, its own strategic partner, in view of the drastic reduction of the Russian presence in the South Caucasus. This includes thwarting plans for the Zangezur transport corridor, which is designed to connect Azerbaijan with Turkey through the Azerbaijani enclave of Nakhichevan. This enclave borders Iran and is surrounded from the north and east by Armenian territory.

Antisemitism has become part of the efforts of the Iranian secret services to destabilize Azerbaijan. This task is not easy, however, as the country has traditionally shown a highly tolerant attitude toward Jews and Israel. Jerusalem has shown itself to be a reliable ally for Azerbaijan, playing a critical role in its security and technological development, and Baku has opened its embassy in Tel Aviv. As a result, Israel’s popularity has boomed among Azerbaijani citizens, mitigating Tehran’s efforts to stir up antisemitic ferment. The Iranians have had to limit their attempts to, for example, delegitimize “the Zionist regime of President Aliyev”.

Along with the surge of anti-Israeli propaganda against Baku, which accompanied Iranian military drills near Azerbaijan’s borders and the activation of disruptive local detachments of Tehran within the country, a significant escalation of antisemitic rhetoric is also taking place in Armenia. The concurrency of these two trends, including a sharp increase in the number of antisemitic and anti-Zionist stories appearing online and in other Armenian media, suggests that Iran is playing a significant role in this case as well.

According to the ADL's World Antisemitism Index 2014 and a survey of antisemitism in 18 European countries, including Armenia, conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2016, Iranian agents employ the entire spectrum of antisemitic narratives.

According to the ADL study, 58% of the adult population of Armenia believe some kind of antisemitic stereotypes. Thirty-two percent of Armenian respondents interviewed by the Pew Research Center in 2015-16 would not be ready to accept Jews as fellow citizens -- the highest percentage of any of the 18 European countries included in the survey. Only 18% of respondents were ready to accept Jews as family members.

The tiny local Jewish community (fewer than 280 households) insists that this perception of Armenians' antisemitism is greatly exaggerated. In their opinion, these are latent sentiments that rarely become active, and are mainly fueled by the defense partnership of Jerusalem and Baku and the unwillingness of Israel to recognize the 1915-16 massacres of Armenians by Turks as similar to the Holocaust.

Israel believes these claims are unjustified and opposes any attempts to "mirror" the Jewish catastrophe, calling it a "trivialization of the Shoah of European Jews". (According to the official position of Jerusalem and much of Israeli society, the Turkish slaughter of the Armenians may have been abhorrent and entirely unjustified, but it is unlikely that the Turks' ultimate goal was the extermination of all Armenians on the face of the earth. It is not, therefore, analogous to the Nazi goal of destroying all the Jews in the world.)

Some Armenian leaders and public figures are aware of the low diplomatic and geopolitical prospects of a never-ending discussion on the non-recognition of the Armenian genocide by Israel and are ready to admit that a more productive narrative is that of "two brotherly peoples united by centuries of cooperation, similar national tragedies, and similar prerequisites of nation and state building". But the mainstream Armenian political and cultural establishments are not yet ready to accept this shift. This reluctance serves Iranian propagandists and the pro-Iranian lobby well, both in Armenia itself and in Armenian diaspora communities (i.e., in France and the US).

All this becomes especially important for Tehran as it seeks to strengthen the status of its sole protege, Armenia, as well as prevent Armenia's joining the Israeli-Azeri-Turkish vector of understanding and consideration of mutual interests that is being carefully constructed on Aliyev's initiative and that could greatly harm Iran's regional ambitions and interests.

Armenian publishers continue to intensify the antisemitism they promote, suggesting they are being instructed to do so by external sources.

According to a report published by the Ministry of the Diaspora on January 29, “In December 2022, in light of the Iranian-Azerbaijani political tensions, Tehran used antisemitic motives in attacks on Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, while trying to stir up antisemitic sentiments by portraying him as a hidden Jew acting at the behest of Israel. For example, Iranian propaganda directed at Azerbaijan depicted President Aliyev in an antisemitic cartoon that was circulated on social networks, and Iranian politicians claimed that Aliyev was a ‘Zionist puppet’ and even published videos on this topic”.¹

From approximately October 2022, social media have been overflowing with declarations, forum discussions, and (pseudo)-analytics calling for a “joint struggle with Iran or Palestinians against Jews and Israel” and promoting Iran as Armenia’s only hope for statehood.

The majority of these materials are supplied by Russian-language and bilingual channels. One such source is TG channel SpitakArch, which had, as of January 2023, about 10,260 followers – a considerable number for a country with an official population of fewer than 3 million. A single thread discussing the enemies and friends of Yerevan included 1,368 posts containing the word “Yid” [an ethnic slur insulting Jews]. Examples include:

“I am a fascist, an antisemite, and see the salvation of Armenians in the complete extermination of Turks and Jews”.

“Hitler did nothing wrong to the Armenians. Except that he exterminated the Yids f***ing poorly, e.g., Mountain Jews have survived”.

“Surely, as I am an Armenian, every proper Armenian has an aversion to Yids”.

“Their (Iranians’) headache are Turks and Yids, and both these scams are our common enemies with the Persians”.

“I believe that Iran should become one of our key allies”.

The Armenian Radical channel (17,605 followers), Armenian Life channel (11,259), fascist sentiment forum Offsprings of Njdeh (over 7,000), and many other sites

with similar coverage and influence are full of similar content, like “I agree with Iran that Yidzrael should be wiped out of the Earth”.

This antisemitic content is completely ignored by the site moderators and does not prompt objections from other discussion participants, which indicates that such rhetoric is acceptable on Armenian social networks. The measure of the value of a Telegram channel is the number of its subscribers. Judging by the absence of objections from moderators, antisemitic rhetoric does not scare off subscribers and does not lead to a decrease in a channel’s popularity.

All this antisemitic delirium is written in Russian -- often quite good Russian. This could be because of the desire to influence both Russian speakers outside Armenia and Russian migrants inside Armenia, the number of whom now exceeds 100,000.

Many ended up in Armenia as a result of a business or personal relocation for temporary or permanent residence after the start of the war in Ukraine and mobilization in Russia. This immigration flow, including many IT professionals, has resulted in a material stabilization of the Armenian economy and drastic growth of its GDP, from 1.6% in 2021 to 13% in a single bound in 2022.

This is the result of the inflow of educated professionals “who establish new companies, buy real estate, and have an indirect impact on the Armenian economy’s growth.” Assuming a substantial number of these people are likely to remain in Armenia and become part of the local business and political elite integrated into the global business, financial, and diplomatic markets, Tehran’s reliance on them may be strategically justified.

To sum up, antisemitism has been and remains a key element of the Islamist Iranian regime’s foreign policy, including its political interests in the South Caucasus, where the rapidly changing situation creates both new challenges and new opportunities for local and foreign players. The Iranians are trying to boost their influence with the help of anti-Zionist rhetoric as expressed by pro-Iranian Islamist circles in Azerbaijan and in Armenia, where the combination of classic and new-age antisemitic propaganda promoted by interest groups and domestic antisemites has a limited but still significant audience.

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¹ https://www.gov.il/BlobFolder/generalpage/file_diaspora/he/anti-semitism_anti_2022.pdf