



Israel and Azerbaijan Relation: A Strategic Compulsion

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In view of recent geopolitical developments in West Asia, Israel has been making attempts to bring in a fresh dynamism to its strategic and political relations with nations, strengthening existing relations, which had remained closeted¹, or paving new avenues of bilateral relations, or making tacit understandings with nations, which had considered Israel as a pariah nation in the past.²The recent visit of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to Azerbaijan should be assessed from such a dimension.

For Israel, bringing out the relationship in the open, it needed to send overt messages to Azerbaijan's Western and Eastern neighbours. Along with the principle of "Deterring Iran"³, for Israel, it had to send out a strong message to the Arab world that Israel can have diplomatic and strategic links with nations in the Muslim world. Facing the rising instability in the region, and the increasing acrimony in the international sphere⁴, Israel is making attempts of opening new avenues of friendship, while strengthening its strategic partnerships.

Similarly, for Azerbaijan, too, the problems remain myriad. Azerbaijan borders four countries, including Iran. It is also a major oil producer.⁵ It is an integral part of the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC), making the role of Russia and Iran in the region imminent. Its strategic location puts the nation at the epicenter, getting embroiled in the regional competition. That has also brought the presence of Azerbaijan's larger neighbours in the region, like China, to protect as well as enhance their economic and strategic interests. With its membership in INSTC along with Russia and Iran, there would be more pulls amongst the two powers over Azerbaijan.

There has also been a rise in tensions in the Armenian – Azerbaijan border along with the constant failure of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group to bring about a long standing resolution in the region. Azerbaijan has been wary about the

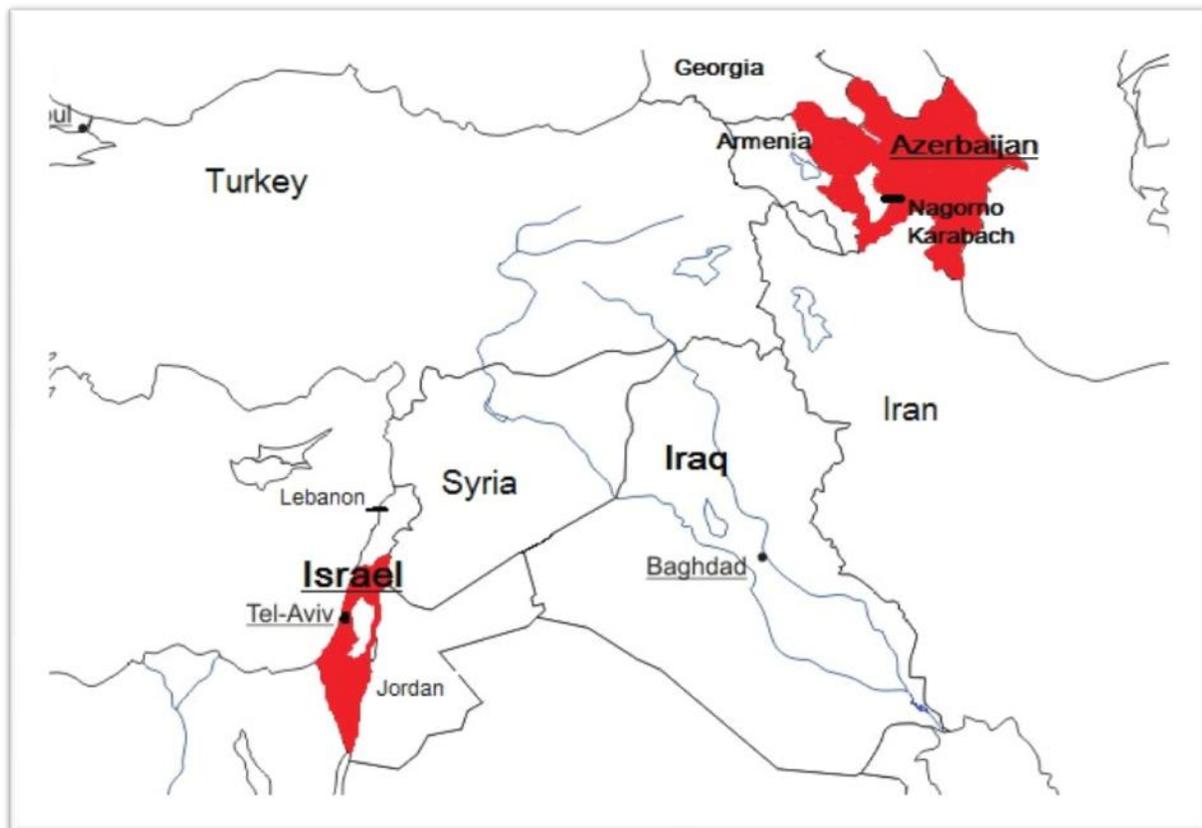
growing influence of Iran. Due to the sectarian nature of the misunderstanding, which has been discussed later in the section dealing with Iran Azerbaijan relations, there has been tension amidst the nations, which has sometimes triggered major and minor conflicts.

Israel – Azerbaijan Relations

The South Caucasus, which includes Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia, is of strategic value for Israel due to its geopolitical position and proximity to Iran.⁶ Azerbaijan, a Shiite Muslim country, had close cultural and historical linkages with Jews, who had been residing in the territory for centuries.⁷

Relations between Israel and Azerbaijan have been like an iceberg with most of the relations being below the surface and only the edge visible.⁸ Though having historical linkages, the present strategic bonding between Israel and Azerbaijan got strengthened post Russo-Georgia war in 2008, which altered the geo-strategic imperatives for the South Caucasus, when Georgia and Azerbaijan, unlike Armenia, leaned more towards NATO, also developing relations with the Jewish state.⁹

Israel and Azerbaijan



Azerbaijan in the last two decades has strengthened defence cooperation with Israel. Azerbaijan has been investing in Israeli defence equipments and systems, which has been strengthened by the recent visit of Prime Minister Netanyahu to Baku. Having diplomatic

relations from 1992, establishing Israeli embassy in Baku in 1993, Israel considers Azerbaijan an important partner. Azerbaijan being a large oil producer is ready to invest a large portion – 5 percent – of its GDP in the military.¹⁰ However, Azerbaijan has chosen not to open an embassy in Tel Aviv, due to its “geopolitical reality”¹¹, and instead maintains an unofficial channel of communication for inter-governmental dialogue, through the Israel offices of the Azerbaijan airlines.¹² Azerbaijan has been playing a crucial role in linking Europe and Asia together, as it provides the only means to bypass Iran and Russia, via the Caspian Sea. It has chosen to opt for a balancing act, while working closely with Iran and Russia, along with other European and Asian nations, while building covert strategic relations with nations like Israel.¹³

Israel emerged as one of Azerbaijan’s closest friends in the Muslim world, maintaining a liberal secular character having a Shiite majority¹⁴, along with the Azerbaijan’s anti-Hezbollah stand. Relations between Azerbaijan and Israel were described by Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev, in 2009 as “discreet but close. Each country finds it easy to identify with the other’s geopolitical difficulties and both rank Iran as an existential security threat. Israel’s world-class defense industry with its relaxed attitude about its customer base is a perfect match for Azerbaijan’s substantial defense needs that are largely left unmet by the United States, Europe, and Russia for various reasons tied to Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh.”¹⁵

The primary strategic threat for Azerbaijan is the conflict over Nagorno Karabach. In the past, it has seen many international actors and regional powers to be overtly or covertly involved in the conflict. A conflict that started from 1920-1921, during the process of delineation of borders; it later led to mass scale exodus (from 1988 till 1996, more than 700,000 people were displaced)¹⁶ and violence during the end of the Cold War, ultimately leading to a ceasefire in 1994. Since then, a significant amount of disputed territory, which was previously in Azerbaijan during the Soviet era, is governed by factions and groups supported by Armenia.

Strategic and Defence Cooperation

In the last two and half decades, Israel and Azerbaijan have developed a steady strategic and defence relationship. Such relations include cooperation in the military and security fields and the exchange of intelligence information, which also includes cooperation in anti-terrorist operations and border security. For example, in 2008, as well as in 2012, Azerbaijani authorities, with the aid of Israeli intelligence services, thwarted a terrorist attack, involving members of a Hezbollah cell, who had planned to attack anti-missile radar systems, as well as the US and Israeli Embassy in Baku.¹⁷ Israel has been providing support to Azerbaijan in strengthening the security infrastructure of the Baku airport, upgrading Azerbaijan’s aging Soviet-origin equipments in the military, training security and military personnel from 2001.¹⁸

The April 2016 escalation of violence in Nagorno Karabach, which led to multiple ceasefire violations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, has turned the region extremely volatile. As per Azerbaijan’s Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov, “The April escalation of the conflict was a vivid reminder that today’s situation existing on the line of contact of Armenia and Azerbaijani troops is dangerous and has a potential to worsen at any time with unpredictable consequences.”¹⁹ The dialogue process that was initiated in Vienna and St. Petersburg in 2016 has not been decisive.

This has reinforced Azerbaijan's resolve in strategically strengthening itself. President Aliyev stated on December 13th 2016 that, Azerbaijan has procured weapons and security equipment from Israel worth \$4.85 billion through long-term contracts over the years. President Aliyev however, did not elaborate on the kind of weapons Azerbaijan is purchasing.²⁰

Azerbaijan has also shown significant interest in the Iron Dome Missile Defence System, the purchase of which was confirmed by Prime Minister Netanyahu in Knesset on December 18th, 2016,²¹ to counter Armenia's recent purchase of Russian Iskander short-range ballistic missiles.²²

The Iron Dome, developed by the Rafael Advanced Defense Systems Ltd., is an air defense system made to intercept short-range rockets and artillery shells fired from distances up to 70 km (43 miles).²³ Azerbaijan is believed to be one of the first countries to be purchasing the weapon. Over the years, there have been reports of other countries – including South Korea, Singapore and India – that have expressed interest in the system, but those sales were never publicly confirmed. Azerbaijan's interest in the system is believed to stem from Armenia's recent purchase of Russian Iskander short-range ballistic missiles.²⁴ Such procurement might not disturb the relations between Israel and Russia, as both remain to be major defence exporters in the region. In the defence industry, Russia still maintains significant edge above the other defence exporters in the region.²⁵

The Iran Factor

To assess the nature of relations between Israel and Azerbaijan, the role of Iran remains important. Iran remains to be one of the major players in the region, who have been threatened by close Azerbaijan – Israeli relations.

Azerbaijan – Iran relations have been hostile in the last two decades, even though having Shia majorities in both the nations. The Turkic origin of Azerbaijan brings in a liberal outlook in the daily lifestyle of the common masses which in Iran remains theocratic, bound in Islamic rules. In view of the Azerbaijani ethnic minority in Iran, the formers secular credentials, which allow more than 40,000 Iranians, to cross over to Azerbaijan to celebrate Novruz holidays, as well as Azerbaijan's openness in lifestyle, and people's access to movies and music, have been an irritant in between the two leaderships.²⁶

Apart from the sectarian aspect, Baku's closeness with US and Israel remains another irritant in Iran – Azerbaijan relations. It has been reported that Azerbaijan has allowed access to its military bases to Israel.²⁷Iran has shot down Israeli drones operating from Azerbaijan; similar drones²⁸ have been used by Azerbaijan over Nagorno Karabach, which was shot down by Armenian troops in 2011.²⁹

Yet, there has been a change in Azerbaijan's relations with the new Iranian leadership under President Aliyev. Especially in view of the North South Transport Corridor, Azerbaijan President Aliyev made a visit to Tehran in February 2016, relations further strengthening with President Hassan Rouhani visiting Baku in August 2016 along with Russian President Vladimir Putin. The North South transport Corridor, which is also partially funded by Iran, is given significant importance by both the leaderships. It will not only be a major land transport link in

between Europe and Asia, but once in function, would also get access to a large share of the cargo currently being shipped through the Suez Canal.³⁰

But, Iran remains to be extremely apprehensive about Israel's strategic closeness with Azerbaijan. Previously, as per reports, Iran wanted Azerbaijan to be a part of the anti-Israeli campaigns that Iran had initiated, which was rejected by the Azerbaijani leadership.³¹ The recent visit by Prime Minister Netanyahu was also not seen positively by Iran. Islamic clerics protested how Azerbaijan being an Islamic country, having a Shiite majority, can come close to a 'perpetrator' (Israel), reminding them, that Israel only considers Azerbaijan to be an ally as Iran is the latter's neighbour, and not because of economic or military reasons.³² The defence ministry of Iran stated that it could not accept a rapprochement between Israel and Azerbaijan. This was taken seriously by Azerbaijani lawmakers that such aggressive stand of Iran against Azerbaijan remains threatening and will have serious consequences in the future.³³ Though, the Iranian leadership has condemned such ties from being made, which brings in the threat of Israel more closer, it has rather been more receptive, possibly in view of the fast changing scenario in the West Asian region and the changing dynamics of nations with larger powers.³⁴

Israel purchases more than half of its oil from Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan.³⁵ During Prime Minister Netanyahu's recent visit to Baku, President Aliyev stated that along with the various defence contracts, Israeli Prime Minister signed four economic cooperation agreements during the recent visit.³⁶

Prime Minister Netanyahu hailed Israel's multi-billion dollar military cooperation with Azerbaijan as a positive example of Muslim-Jewish coexistence. Prime Minister Netanyahu in his remarks also noted the growing cooperation between the two countries in the energy, agriculture, IT and education sectors.³⁷ Baku has also initiated the process of procuring Israel's Iron Dome Missile Defense System, which has been discussed before.³⁸

Assessment

Prime Minister Netanyahu on December 14th 2016, said that "I don't deny that I have double intentions" while showing his genuine interest in boosting trade and security ties with these countries. He also wanted to use his visit to show moderate Arab states that it is possible for Muslim States³⁹ to have strong and overt ties with Israel.⁴⁰ The present opening up of relations with Azerbaijan remain noteworthy due to the country's strategic location and importance. Geo-strategic shifts are taking place along with the swift changing theaters of conflict. New power balances and equations are arising from such changes, giving birth to different non-state actors playing important roles in regional and international politics. There may be re-moulding of relations with nations that Israel considers to be its adversary. The future might necessitate more overt allies and friends, and nations like Azerbaijan might facilitate the process of creating an environment and ground, for building such an understanding.

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End Notes

¹ The term “closeted relationship” was used by many dignitaries in India, during Israeli President Rivlin’s visit to India in October 2016, stating how the relationship had been before and how such relationship has now come out in the open, as a positive and significant partnership.

² It has been reported in Israeli media about the manner in which some Arab states have adapted tacit but positive diplomatic initiatives towards Israel.

³ Ariel Harkham, “Deterring Iran the day after the deal”, *The Jerusalem Post*, August 22, 2015, <http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Deterring-Iran-the-day-after-the-deal-412938>

⁴ The passage of United Security Council Resolution 2334 on December 23rd 2016 has raised the possibility of Israel finding itself cornered in the International Organisation.

⁵ Yossi Melman, “Intelligence: Israel and Azerbaijan - the odd couple”, *The Jerusalem Post*, April 16, 2016, <http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/INTELLIGENCE-The-odd-couple-451276>

⁶ Anna Geifman and Dima Course, “Israel and Azerbaijan: Geopolitical Reasons for Stronger Ties”, BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 208, July 15, 2013, <http://besacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/perspectives208.pdf>

⁷ Mahir Khalifa-Zadeh, “Israel And Azerbaijan: To Counteract Iran”, *Central Asia And The Caucasus*, Volume 13, Issue 3, 2012, pp. 68-69

⁸ A telegram from the US embassy in Azerbaijan that was published in Wikileaks claimed that the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, in 2009 compared Israel-Azerbaijan relations with the idiom of the iceberg. Wikileaks, <https://wikileaks.org/cable/2009/01/09BAKU20.html>.

⁹ Mahir Khalifa-Zadeh, “Israel And Azerbaijan: To Counteract Iran”, *Central Asia And The Caucasus*, Volume 13, Issue 3, 2012, pp. 68-69

¹⁰ Yossi Melman, “Intelligence: Israel and Azerbaijan - the odd couple”, *The Jerusalem Post*, April 16, 2016, <http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/INTELLIGENCE-The-odd-couple-451276>

¹¹ It has been stated that due to its complicated geopolitical situation, particularly its proximity to Iran, as well as its membership in international Islamic Organisations, have prevented it from opening an embassy in Israel. *USAK Yearbook of International Politics and Law 2010(2010)*, Vol 3, USAK Publishers: Ankara, p. 321; Maayan Jaffe-Hoffman, “Azerbaijan & Israel: A Covert but Strategic Relationship”, *The Jewish Press*, September 17, 2015, <http://www.jewishpress.com/indepth/analysis/azerbaijan-israel-a-covert-but-strategic-relationship/2015/09/17/>

¹² Alexander Murinson, “The Ties between Israel and Azerbaijan,” *Mideast Security and Policy Studies* No. 110 (October 2014): 14

¹³ Mathieu Duchâtel, François Godement, Kadri Liik, Jeremy Shapiro, Louisa Slavkova, Angela Stanzel & Vessela Tcherneva, “Eurasian integration: Caught between Russia and China”, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, June 7, 2016, http://www.ecfr.eu/article/essay_eurasian

¹⁴ Islam, as per survey, has been more of an ethnic or national characteristic than a religious denomination. Though having 95% Muslim population (85% Shi’a and 15% Sunni), Article 48 of the Constitution ensures the liberty of worship to everyone making the country a secular one. Religion, Administrative Department of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, http://files.preslib.az/projects/remz/pdf_en/atr_din.pdf

¹⁵ Comment found in a telegram sent by the US embassy and was published in Wikileaks, <https://wikileaks.org/cable/2009/01/09BAKU20.html>

¹⁶ “Conflicts in the Caucasus”, UNHCR publication for CIS Conference (Displacement in the CIS), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, May 1, 1996, <http://www.unhcr.org/publications/refugeemag/3b5583fd4/unhcr-publication-cis-conference-displacement-cis-conflicts-caucasus.html?query=Nagorno%20Karabach>

¹⁷ “Iran Rebukes Azerbaijan for Allegedly Aiding Israel’s Mossad”, *Haaretz*, February 12, 2012, <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/iran-rebukes-azerbaijan-for-allegedly-aiding-israel-s-mossad-1.412511>; Alexander Murinson, “The Ties Between Israel and Azerbaijan”, *Mideast Security and Policy Studies* No. 110, The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Bar-Ilan University, October 2014, p. 22

¹⁸ Christopher Bollyn, “The Great Game for the Oil & Gas of the Caspian Region”, *American Free Press*, September 26, 2001, <http://www.bollyn.com/the-great-game-for-the-oilgas-of-the-caspian-region-2>; “Ankara Israel and Turkey are planning joint weapons projects in Central Asia”, *World tribune.com*, February 2, 2004, http://www.worldtribune.com/worldtribune/WTARC/2004/me_centralasia_02_01.html

¹⁹ On April 1, 2016 conflict broke out in the disputed territories of Nagorno Karabach, which is known as the ‘Four Day War’ or the ‘April War’. The Nagorno Karabach Defense Army, supported by the Armenian Armed forces fought with the Azerbaijani Armed forces, which led to a ceasefire on April 5, 2016. Azerbaijan claimed to have regained some territory during the conflict. As per US State Department, more than 350 people – military and civilians, died in the conflict. The situation post ceasefire remains to be extremely volatile till date. “Nagorno-Karabakh violence: Worst clashes in decades kill dozens”, *BBC News*, April 3, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35949991>; “More than 2,000 hectares of land have been released by armed forces”, Official site of Ministry of Defense of Azerbaijan, May 18, 2016, http://mod.gov.az/index2.php?content=news/2016/20160518_ermeniler; “Karabach lost 800 ha that played no strategic role: Armenia”, *Pan Armenian News*, May 17, 2016, <http://www.panarmenian.net/eng/news/212454/>; “Background Briefing on the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict”, Special Briefing, Senior State Department Officials,

- Vienna, Austria, May 16, 2016, US Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/05/257263.htm>; “Conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh May Escalate at Any Moment”, *Sputnik News*, December 8, 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/politics/201612081048319890-karabakh-conflict-escalation/>
- ²⁰ Yossi Melman, “Iranian adversary reveals it bought \$5 billion of weapons from Israel”, *The Jerusalem Post*, December 13, 2016, <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Politics-And-Diplomacy/Israel-looking-to-sell-missile-defense-systems-to-Azerbaijan-475242>
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- ²² “Azerbaijan becomes the first country to obtain Iron Dome missile system from Israel”, *Eurasia Dairy: International Analytical Information Gateway*, December 19, 2016, <http://eurasiadiary.com/news/politics/92417-azerbaijan-becomes-the-first-country-to-obtain-iron-dome-missile-system-from-israel>
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³⁹An example of good relationship with a Muslim country is Turkey (though there were some issues related to the Marmara incident). Though diplomatic relations were broken after the incident, recently, both the nations have decided to mend relations, re-opening their respective embassies in Ankara and Tel Aviv.

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