

Azerbaijan's Cooperation with Israel Goes Beyond Iran Tensions

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Azerbaijan has ample, independent strategic reasons for its cooperation with Israel and poor relations with Tehran, notwithstanding the recent spike in Iranian tensions.

In recent years, Israel and Azerbaijan have intensified their security cooperation and military trade. At the same time, tensions between Azerbaijan and Iran have increased. Yet these two developments have been largely independent of each other, despite Tehran's efforts to promote misconceptions to the contrary.

ISRAELI-AZERBAIJANI RELATIONS

Israel recognized Azerbaijan's independence in 1991 and opened an embassy there in 1993. Since then, several Israeli delegations have visited the country: in 1997, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu met with then-president Heydar Aliyev; in 2009, three Israeli ministers and fifty businessmen joined President Shimon Peres to visit current president Ilham Aliyev, with whom Peres is close; and former foreign minister Avigdor Liberman visited in February 2010 and April 2012.

Baku has not reciprocated by opening an embassy in Israel, citing fears that Muslim-majority states in the UN would vote unfavorably on its conflict with Armenia over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region. Yet several Azerbaijani officials have visited Israel, including Minister of Ecology and Natural Resources Huseyn Bagirov (December 2002 and November 2006), Minister of Communications and Information Technologies Ali Abbasov (November 2003), Minister of Emergency Situations Kemaleddin Heydarov (March 2007), and Transportation Minister Ziya Mammadov (June 2007). Moreover, the Azerbaijani national airline AZAL has had regular flights to Tel Aviv since 1993, and Israelis are among the few passport holders eligible for visas at the Baku airport.

More broadly, Israel has been among Azerbaijan's top five trade partners in recent years. Baku is Israel's top oil supplier, providing around 40 percent of its annual consumption, while Israel is the sixth highest importer of Azerbaijani oil exports. The oil arrives via a pipeline through Turkey that continued to function even when Israeli-Turkish relations hit rock bottom in recent years. In addition, a subsidiary of the State Oil Company of the Azerbaijan Republic (SOCAR) participates in oil and gas exploration off Israel's coast. The project is the first of its kind for SOCAR outside the Caspian region and could contribute to the firm's quest to become an international oil company.

Meanwhile, Azerbaijan has become a major consumer of Israeli armaments and military expertise. In February 2012, the two countries confirmed the signing of an arms-supply agreement valued at \$1.6 billion, to include Israeli drones and anti-aircraft/missile-defense systems. Israeli firms are also involved in technology transfers as part of Azerbaijan's efforts to establish an indigenous arms industry; one joint company is already producing unmanned military vehicles in Baku.

On the cultural front, Azerbaijan has been home to a Jewish community for over 2,000 years, based in Baku and the northern city of Quba. Today, this community numbers around 20,000-25,000, similar to the Jewish populations in Iran and Turkey. Azerbaijani Jews enjoy safety and freedom of worship and culture; President Aliyev visits their community institutions in Quba annually and issues regular greetings on Jewish holidays and a solidarity statement on Holocaust Remembrance Day.

IRANIAN-AZERBAIJANI RELATIONS

Iranian officials and media outlets have attempted to portray Tehran's hostility toward Azerbaijan as a response to Baku's close ties with Israel, depicting the Islamic Republic as the victim of cooperation between the two states. History does not support this claim, however -- Tehran has acted against independent Azerbaijan from its inception in 1991, long before it formed close links with Israel.

The most plausible explanation for this antagonism is fear that Azerbaijani nationalism and prosperity could incite Iran's own Azerbaijani community, which comprises a full third of the country's population. Whatever the reason, Tehran has long threatened its neighbor's security and economic progress, supporting Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh war during the early 1990s and attempting to thwart Azerbaijan's energy export projects. In a recent conference at Johns Hopkins University, Armenian diplomats openly acknowledged Iranian support.

Tehran also sponsors or maintains ties with Islamist and other antigovernment groups next door. Baku has thwarted a number of local terrorist plots by Iranian-connected groups targeting the U.S. and Israeli embassies as well as Jewish community institutions in the capital. In 2008, for instance, officials announced that they had foiled a plan to explode car bombs near the Israeli embassy; two Lebanese citizens with ties to Iran were later convicted for the plot in an Azerbaijani court. And in 2011, Iranian-connected operatives attempted to assassinate the U.S. ambassador in Azerbaijan (for more details on the plot, see Matthew Levitt's recent study [Hizballah and the Qods Force in Iran's Shadow War with the West](#)).

For its part, Baku has been largely cautious in its policy toward the Azerbaijani minority in Iran. For instance, Iranian delegations have been conspicuously excluded from officially sponsored diaspora conferences in Baku for two decades. During periods of intense Iranian hostility, however, Baku often uses the "South Azerbaijan" issue to remind Tehran that it has the means to threaten Iran's stability. In July 2001, for example, Iranian gunboats threatened a BP exploration vessel in the Azerbaijani-controlled sector of the Caspian Sea, and Iranian warplanes violated the country's airspace several times. Baku responded by publishing schoolbooks containing maps of Azerbaijan that encompassed northwestern Iran, while television outlets renewed broadcasts of a series on the culture of "South Azerbaijan."

More recently, Baku allowed the South Azerbaijan National Liberation Movement to hold a conference in the capital on March 30, highlighting the latest spike in tensions with Tehran. In response, Hossein Shariatmadari -- the publisher of *Kayhan* (Iran's largest newspaper) and a close advisor to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei -- demanded that Azerbaijan hold a referendum on whether to join Iran.

As described above, however, the particularly tense atmosphere of late is not exceptional. Tehran has clashed with Baku numerous times over the past two decades, and the character of their relations has not been a direct result of Azerbaijan's dealings with Israel. To be sure, Azerbaijani-Israeli rapprochement is a function of the wider strategic challenges Baku faces (including frequent destabilization attempts from Iran and Russia as they attempt to regain control over the Caspian region), but Tehran is only part of this calculus.

In short, Azerbaijan has good, independent strategic reasons for its cooperation with Israel and poor relations with Iran. Notwithstanding Tehran's rhetoric to the contrary, Baku and Israel share a common regional orientation, strong strategic cooperation with the United States, and a potent security threat from Iran.

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