



Academic Paper

# **The Role of Azerbaijan in the Possible Turkish-Israeli Rapprochement**



**Dr. Said El-Haj**

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# The Role of Azerbaijan in the Possible Turkish-Israeli Rapprochement

Dr. Said El-Haj<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

In 2021, a series of dialogues and meetings took place between antagonistic and confrontational parties in the region, motivated by several reasons, foremost of which is the new US administration and its orientations. Among those were several rounds of dialogues between Turkey and Egypt, as well as the Turkish-Emirati rapprochement which culminated in the visit of Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed to Ankara, and the signing of several memoranda of understanding between the UAE and Turkey.

Within this course, the Turkish president announced that similar steps will be witnessed in his country's relations with both Egypt and Israel, and some reports expect that Turkey would exchange ambassadors with Israel by mid-2022.

Turkey, on one hand, has common reasons with the Arab countries including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, UAE and Bahrain, for the rapprochement with Israel. On the other hand, it has its own reasons, including the good joint relations with Azerbaijan, and the role the latter wants to play in this rapprochement.



<sup>1</sup> A Palestinian doctor residing in Turkey; writer and political analyst on Turkish affairs in particular, and the issues of the Arab and Muslim countries, in general. He has hundreds of periodical articles and made dozens of interviews in newspapers, websites, Arab studies centers, and satellite channels besides his participation in a number of international forums and conferences.



## First: Azerbaijani-Israeli Relations

Azerbaijan is the Muslim country with the closest ties to Israel due to three main reasons: the early Israeli recognition of the state of Azerbaijan, the interests each seeks from the other, such as gas and weapons, and the common hostility or rivalry with Iran.

Based on Avigdor Lieberman's suggestion, Israel recognized Azerbaijan's independence in 1991, right after the collapse of the Soviet Union, in an effort to build distinguished relations with it. Two years later, it opened an embassy in the capital, Baku.<sup>2</sup>

In terms of interests, their relations have been based on mutual dependence, as Israel imports around 40% of Azerbaijan's oil exports, while the latter is one of the most important arms importing countries from Israel.<sup>3</sup> Israel ranked second after Russia among the countries exporting arms to Baku throughout 2011–2020.<sup>4</sup>



**Avigdor Lieberman**

The most prominent factor is their positions towards Iran. For Iran sided with Armenia in the 1990's in the Caucasus War,<sup>5</sup> and it has its own sensitivities towards Azerbaijan whether regarding the ruling regime and its way of governance, or the Azerbaijani minority in north Iran and the fears of separatist tendencies.<sup>6</sup>



However, Israel's most important goals from advanced relations with Baku is to guarantee their alliance against Iran, obtain intelligence information about Tehran, and market Israeli military products.

Over the past three decades, relations have developed, especially in terms of security and military cooperation. In 2009, WikiLeaks published an US cable

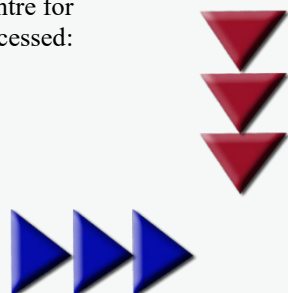
<sup>2</sup> Adnan Abu Amer, "Israel and Azerbaijan: Mutual Interests and Strategic Alliance," Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, 16/5/2012, <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/node/3402> (Accessed: 30/12/2021) (in Arabic)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Pieter D. Wezeman, Alexandra Kuimova and Jordan Smith, "Arms transfers to conflict zones: The Case of Nagorno – Karabakh," site of Sipri, 30/4/2021, <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-backgrounder/2021/arms-transfers-conflict-zones-case-nagorno-karabakh> (Accessed: 30/12/2021)

<sup>5</sup> Said El-Haj, "Nagorno-Karabakh: A New Battlefield Between Russia and Turkey," Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, 28/9/2020, <https://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/reports/2016/05/160502100617839.html> (Accessed: 30/12/2021) (in Arabic)

<sup>6</sup> Adnan Abu Amer, "Israel and Azerbaijan: Mutual Interests and Strategic Alliance."





reporting that Israel has used Azerbaijani territories to spy on Iran.<sup>7</sup> In 2012, Foreign Policy published a report which talked about an Israeli presence in Azerbaijani airbases and said that such presence has heightened the risks of an Israeli strike on Iran.<sup>8</sup> Also, Azerbaijan has concluded almost annually arms deals with Israel to buy drones and antiaircraft/missile-defense systems, where in 2012 it was valued at \$1.6 billion.<sup>9</sup>

In 2018, General Staff Chief of Azerbaijani Armed Forces, Najmaddin Sadikov, visited Israel and sealed several security deals.<sup>10</sup> In August 2020, Azerbaijan opened a trade office in Israel to promote economic relations and tourism, a step Israel believed would precede embassy opening.<sup>11</sup>



**Najmaddin Sadikov**

However, the military confrontation in the fall of 2020 between Azerbaijan and Armenia revealed an advanced level of cooperation between Azerbaijan and Israel. The Azerbaijani president published a picture of him with an Israeli drone,<sup>12</sup> and in October 2020, Amnesty International accused Baku of using internationally prohibited Israeli weapons.<sup>13</sup>

This steadily developing cooperation between Israel and Azerbaijan has always triggered Iranian objection, which is already apprehensive about the ethnic Azeri minority in its north. Iran has accused Azerbaijan of facilitating the Mossad's action against it, and that it may allow Israel to use its airports to strike Tehran. Iranian officials said that Israel launched attacks and operations from Azeri soil



<sup>7</sup> Wikileaks: Israel Spies on Iran from Azerbaijan, site of Arabs 48, 1/4/2011, <https://www.arab48.com> (Accessed: 30/12/2021)

<sup>8</sup> Mark Perry, Israel's Secret Staging Ground, site of *Foreign Policy* magazine, 28/3/2012, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/03/28/israels-secret-staging-ground/> (Accessed: 30/12/2021)

<sup>9</sup> Unprecedented Growth in Relations Between Israel and Azerbaijan!, Palestinian Forum for Israeli Studies "Madar", 23/1/2018, <https://www.madarcenter.org> (Accessed: 30/12/2018)

<sup>10</sup> In First, Azeri Chief of Staff in Israel to Conclude Arms Deals, Arabs 48, 24/10/2018, <https://www.arab48.com> (Accessed: 30/12/2021)

<sup>11</sup> Azerbaijan Opens a Trade Office in Tel Aviv, Anadolu Agency, 29/7/2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/ar> (Accessed: 31/12/2021) (in Arabic)

<sup>12</sup> Israel's Weapons on Tehran's Borders: What is Behind the Tensions Between Azerbaijan and Iran?, site of Aljazeera.net, 7/10/2021, <https://www.aljazeera.net> (Accessed: 31/12/2021) (in Arabic)

<sup>13</sup> Nagorno-Karabakh: Amnesty International Accuses Azerbaijan of Using Israeli Cluster Bombs in the Conflict with Armenia, site of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), 6/10/2021, <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/world-54433596> (Accessed: 31/12/2021) (in Arabic)



to target Iran, including seizing Iranian archives<sup>14</sup> and assassinating Iranian nuclear scientists.<sup>15</sup>

Israel's use of Azerbaijan to spy on Iran, through a Mossad base on its territory, was mentioned in different reports,<sup>16</sup> and several Iranian officials revealed that their country had information about the presence of "Israeli forces" on the Azerbaijani-Iranian border and within Iranian territory,<sup>17</sup> which allegations were denied by several officials in Baku, led by President Ilham Aliyev.<sup>18</sup>



**Ilham Aliyev**

Iran also moved from verbally objecting to this cooperation to conducting its largest maneuvers in three decades near the border with Azerbaijan, under the name "Conquerors of Khaybar," in a clear message to Baku regarding its relations with Israel.<sup>19</sup> Iranian foreign ministry spokesperson Saeed Khatibzadeh said that his country would not tolerate Israeli presence near its borders.<sup>20</sup>



**Saeed Khatibzadeh**

## **Second: Rapprochement with Israel**

Turkey was the first country in the Muslim world to recognize Israel since 1949, but the relation between the two has always been fluctuating and unstable. The 1990's

<sup>14</sup> Did Israel Smuggle the Iranian Archive Through Azerbaijan?, Aljazeera.net, 4/5/2018. (in Arabic)

<sup>15</sup> Azerbaijan, Israel's Platform to Attack Iran, Aljazeera.net, 19/4/2012. (in Arabic)

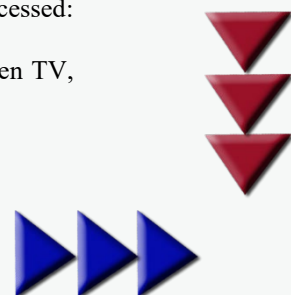
<sup>16</sup> Azerbaijan Israel's Strategic Ally in the Caucasus, Aljazeera.net, 17/4/2016. (in Arabic)

<sup>17</sup> Abdullahian: We Refuse to Let the Israelis Demobilize in Azerbaijan, site of Russia Today, 2/10/2021, <https://arabic.rt.com> (Accessed: 31/12/2021) (in Arabic)

<sup>18</sup> Azerbaijan Denies Any Israeli Presence Near its Border with Iran, Anadolu Agency, 4/10/2021. (in Arabic)

<sup>19</sup> Iranian Maneuvers Amidst Tension with Azerbaijan: Military Messages to Baku and Ankara, *al-'Arabi al-Jadid* newspaper (The New Arab), London, 1/10/2021, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk> (Accessed: 31/12/2021)

<sup>20</sup> Khatibzadeh: Iran Will Never Tolerate the Presence of Israel on its Borders, site of Al-Mayadeen TV, 11/10/2021, <https://www.almayadeen.net/news/politics/> (Accessed: 31/12/2021)



are considered a golden era for the Turkish-Israeli relations, which were almost tantamount to a strategic alliance, but that was not repeated again.<sup>21</sup>

The first years of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) witnessed rapprochement with Israel and an attempt to mediate between it and a number of Arab and Muslim countries, such as Syria and Pakistan. Yet, relations declined significantly starting in 2009, then diplomatic relations were severed in 2010 following the Mavi Marmara attack. Although relations were restored after the 2016 agreement, they quickly regressed after Turkey expelled the Israeli ambassador in May 2018, due to the brutal aggression on the Marches of Return in Gaza and the decision to relocate the US embassy to Jerusalem.<sup>22</sup>



Since then, Turkish politicians have reiterated that their problem with the Israeli government lied in its repressive policies against the Palestinians. At the end of 2020, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan clearly stated that Ankara desires to improve relations with Israel.<sup>23</sup> The year 2021 witnessed a Turkish rapprochement with a number of Arab countries that were classified in an axis opposite to Ankara, namely Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE, and this culminated in the visit of Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed to Ankara and the warm reception he received. On the sidelines of the visit, which was described as historic, the Turkish president said that similar strong steps would be taken with both Egypt and Israel.<sup>24</sup>



**Recep Tayyip Erdoğan**

<sup>21</sup> Said El-Haj, Academic Paper “The Impact of the Election of Joe Biden on the Turkish-Israeli Relations,” Al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies and Consultations, Beirut, 8/4/2021, <https://www.alzaytouna.net> (Accessed: 31/12/2021) (in Arabic)

<sup>22</sup> Turkey Expels Israel’s Ambassador and Tel Aviv Expels Turkish Consul in Jerusalem, Aljazeera.net, 15/5/2018. (in Arabic)

<sup>23</sup> Erdogan: We Want Better Relations with Israel and its Approach Prevents That, site of DW, 25/12/2020, <https://www.dw.com/ar/> (Accessed: 31/12/2021) (in Arabic)

<sup>24</sup> Erdogan: I Will Visit the UAE Next February and We Will Take Similar Steps with Egypt and Israel, site of Daily Sabah, 29/11/2021, <https://www.dailysabah.com/arabic/politics> (Accessed: 31/12/2021)

There are many reasons that push Turkey to take these steps. Some are common interests with the above mentioned Arab countries, such as the economy, the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic, the policies of the new US administration, the approaching presidential and legislative elections in Turkey, and the desire to calm some regional files. Other reasons are related to its relations with Israel.<sup>25</sup>

Turkey has always considered the relations with Israel an important key to its relations with the US, especially since Turkey is not at its best with the Biden administration.<sup>26</sup> Turkey is also concerned by the looming regional axis led by Greece and Israel that would deprive it of its rights in the eastern Mediterranean. Therefore, it wants to disrupt this axis and win some of its members to its side or at least neutralize them, hence, its efforts with Egypt and Israel. Ankara also historically benefits from the efforts of the Zionist lobby against the Armenian lobby in the US, especially regarding allegations related to the 1915 events and the attempts to classify them as a “genocide” committed by the Ottoman State against the Armenians.



**Joe Biden**

Improving Israeli-Turkish relations face major obstacles, mainly, the conditions set by each side. For Israel stipulates the closure of what it called “ Hamas offices in Istanbul” that are used, according to Israeli claims, to “direct terrorist activities in the West Bank, recruit Palestinians to carry out terrorist activities, and finance them.”<sup>27</sup> In return, Turkey stipulated stopping Israeli attacks on the Palestinians, undoing the actions that have undermined the two-state solution, returning to “peace” talks, stopping the construction of illegal settlements and the theft of Palestinian lands, and desisting from measures aimed at changing the status quo in Jerusalem.<sup>28</sup>

However, despite these obstacles, there were “positive” signs at the end of 2021, following Ankara’s arrest and release of two Israelis, when Israel’s president and

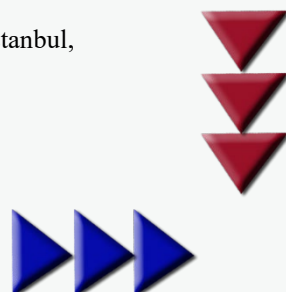
<sup>25</sup> For more about the issue, see for example:

Said El-Haj, The Rapprochement with Turkey Between the Slowdown of the Emirates and the Rush of Egypt, *Aljazeera.net*, 6/12/2021. (in Arabic)

<sup>26</sup> Erdogan in a Sharp Attack on Biden: I Have Not Seen Such a Situation with Any of the Previous US Administrations, *Russia Today*, 24/9/2021. (in Arabic)

<sup>27</sup> Israel Links the Strengthening of its Relations with Turkey to Closing “ Hamas” Offices in Istanbul, *Asharq al-Awsat* newspaper, London, 19/1/2021, <https://aawsat.com> (Accessed: 31/12/2021)

<sup>28</sup> *Al-Quds al-Arabi* newspaper, London, 7/6/2021, <https://www.alquds.co.uk> (in Arabic)





prime minister called Erdoğan and thanked him. In the two calls, Erdoğan stressed the importance of the bilateral relations for “the stability of the region,”<sup>29</sup> which prompted expectations that ambassadors would be appointed between the two sides by the middle of this year.

### Third: The Role of Azerbaijan

Turkey and Azerbaijan have distinguished and special relations, including religious, ethnic, cultural ones, as well as the language. They describe these relations with the slogan “One people in two states.” Therefore, Baku is often the first foreign destination, or the second after Turkish



Cyprus, for every elected president or prime minister. In addition, the two countries cooperate in vital strategic areas, as Azerbaijan is one of the most important gas-exporting countries to Turkey, and the latter is one of the biggest supporters of Azerbaijan in general, and in its conflict with Armenia in particular, including the large and declared Turkish contributions to the development of Azerbaijani military establishment, training and armament. To this is added the important geo-political dimension, which is in the fact that Azerbaijan is included in Turkey’s strategy regarding the Caucasus and Central Asia, particularly the Turkish republics, and the competition with international powers such as Russia, Iran and China.<sup>30</sup>



<sup>29</sup> Erdogan calls Herzog... What are the Implications of the Turkish-Israeli Rapprochement?, Al-Mayadeen TV, 18/11/2021.

<sup>30</sup> Said El-Haj, “Nagorno-Karabakh: A New Battlefield Between Russia and Turkey.”



With these special relations, Baku becomes somehow a common friend or a common denominator between Turkey and Israel, and the three are brought together through two important issues:

- ▶ 1. The support of Israel and Turkey for Azerbaijan against Armenia, and their participation in arming it, especially with drones, which was clearly demonstrated in the last war.
- ▶ 2. The two sides agree to support Azerbaijan in confronting Iran. On the sidelines of the dispute, tension and threats that prevailed between Tehran and Baku, Turkey clearly sided with Baku, which annoyed Tehran.<sup>31</sup>

The actual and the supposed relations of Israel with Azerbaijan were one of the most important reasons for the largest Iranian maneuvers in decades near the border with Azerbaijan. In return, Azerbaijan launched joint military drills with Turkey.<sup>32</sup> It seems that the continuation of Iranian statements regarding Azerbaijan have deepened security and defense ties between Ankara and Baku, despite the decline of danger from the Armenian side.

In January 2021, Turkey and Azerbaijan signed the “Islamabad Declaration” with Pakistan,<sup>33</sup> and the three countries conducted a joint military exercise in September, then another in October in Nakhchivan. In June 2021, Presidents Erdoğan and Aliyev signed the “Shusha Declaration” to consolidate and boost cooperation between the two countries to “establish alliance relations.” The declaration stated:

If, in the opinion of one of the parties, there is a threat or an act of aggression from a third state or states against their independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, the inviolability or security of their internationally recognized borders, the parties will hold joint consultations and, in order to eliminate this threat or acts of aggression, carry out initiatives in accordance with the purposes and principles of the UN Charter and provide each other with the necessary assistance in accordance with the UN Charter. After determining through urgent discussions the volume and form of such possible assistance, a decision will be made to secure defense needs for the adoption of joint measures and coordinated activities will be organized of power-wielding and administrative agencies of the Armed Forces.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Tehran Responds to Erdogan’s Allusion to “Azeri Nationalism” in Iran, *al-‘Arabi al-Jadid*, 23/10/2021.

<sup>32</sup> Military Maneuvers and Turkish Interference: What is Happening on the Iranian-Azerbaijani Border?, *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, 4/10/2021.

<sup>33</sup> “Islamabad Declaration”: A Step to Strengthen Cooperation Between Turkey, Azerbaijan and Pakistan, Anadolu Agency, 14/1/2021. (in Arabic)

<sup>34</sup> Shusha Declaration on Allied Relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Turkey, site of Azerbaijan State News Agency, 17/6/2021, [https://azertag.az/en/xeber/Shusha\\_Declaration\\_on\\_Allied\\_Relations\\_between\\_the\\_Republic\\_of\\_Azerbaijan\\_and\\_the\\_Republic\\_of\\_Turkey-1809375](https://azertag.az/en/xeber/Shusha_Declaration_on_Allied_Relations_between_the_Republic_of_Azerbaijan_and_the_Republic_of_Turkey-1809375) (Accessed: 2/2/2022)



Baku seems to be seeking to bring together its allies and supporters against Armenia, on the one hand, and the Iranian threats, on the other hand. In December 2020, its Foreign Minister Ceyhun Bayramov spoke about the possibility for his country to mediate between Israel and Turkey.<sup>35</sup> Some media outlets reported that the Turkish president did not object to such mediation, and that he desires to improve relations with Israel.



**Ceyhun Bayramov**

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, there is a real Turkish desire to improve relations with Israel for the aforementioned reasons, and in parallel seek appeasement and rapprochement with some active Arab countries.

Although this path is fraught with a number of obstacles, foremost of which are the conditions set by each side, a mutual trusted party can mediate between them, where Azerbaijan is the number one candidate. For it is a close ally of Turkey, on the one hand, and it is the closest Muslim country to Israel, on the other hand. Their relations are based on common interests and threats, they even hold high-level bilateral meetings in a way that is not recurrent with any other Muslim-majority countries.<sup>36</sup>

Several reports spoke of Azerbaijan's desire to play the role of mediator between Turkey and Israel asserting that Ankara welcomed this despite previous Israeli reservations. Recent contacts between the two sides, which prove the importance of improving relations between them, may revitalize the possible Azerbaijani mediation, especially since Turkey has talked about the continuation of talks at intelligence level.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Azerbaijan is Mediating Between Turkey and Israel, *al-'Arabi al-Jadid*, 24/12/2020.

<sup>36</sup> Ilham Aliyev and Prime Minister of Israel Benjamin Netanyahu held one-on-one meeting, site of President of the Republic of Azerbaijan: Ilham Aliyev, 13/12/2016, <https://president.az/en/articles/view/22032> (Accessed: 31/12/2021)

<sup>37</sup> Erdogan: The Foreign Minister and the Intelligence Service play an Active Role in Relations with Abu Dhabi and Israel, site of Sputnik Arabic, 8/12/2021, <https://arabic.sputniknews.com/20211208/> (Accessed: 31/12/2021) (in Arabic)



It should be noted here that regional developments are no less important than the initial desire of both Turkey and Israel to improve relations, as well as Azerbaijan's willingness to mediate between them. Ankara's ability to disrupt the regional axis facing it in the eastern Mediterranean and to win over one of its members to its side—particularly Egypt—will reduce its need for rapprochement with Israel and its rush towards it, and vice versa. The exacerbation of tension between Iran and Azerbaijan could remove some obstacles to the rapprochement between Turkey and Israel at a time when calm and return to the diplomatic language between them will reduce pressure on Ankara to improve relations with it.



In conclusion and in short, rapprochement between Turkey and Israel is not definite but most likely. If it happens, it is not clear at what level. Also, the Azerbaijani mediation is not guaranteed, since it is dependent on many factors and local, regional, and international developments that are not only influenced by the directly related parties.

