



Academic Paper

Azerbaijan in Israel's International Strategy



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Dr. Prof. Walid 'Abd al-Hay¹

Introduction

Within any country's endeavor to build its international relations, priorities are set for its foreign policy. Countries might strengthen the already existing relations, build new ones or gradually reduce hostilities when they exist. All of this aims to expand international support and diminish its opposition.



When setting foreign policy of a country, other countries are ranked based on their strategic status, whether international or regional, then steps to build relations with them are determined.

When dividing the international community into geopolitical regions based on geographical variables and historical ties between each region's units, we find competition among the countries of each region over determining which one is the "core state." For this state would be the one that controls the largest number of interactions among the units and the region's various political and economic orientations, and such acknowledgement, whether explicit or implicit, would be in the favor of that state.²

Accordingly, the regional status of any country is determined by how close or far it is from the core state or its recognition as a regional power. The European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) "defines a regional power as a state belonging to a geographically defined region, dominating this region in economic and military terms, able to exercise hegemonic influence in the region and considerable influence on the world scale, willing to make use of power resources and recognized or even accepted as the regional leader by its neighbors." The



German Institute for Global and Area Studies (CIGA) defined it as part of a definable region with an identity of its own, that claims to be one (self-image of a regional power), exerts decisive influence on the geographic extension of the region as well as on its ideological construction, disposes over comparatively high military, economic, demographic, political and ideological capabilities, defines the regional security agenda to a high degree, and is appreciated as a regional power by other powers in the region and beyond, especially by other regional powers. This means that the strategic interactions in the region must be shaped to a high degree according to the orientations of the core state or the regional power.³

Based on the above, we will try to identify the strengths of Azerbaijan as the core state in the Caucasus region, while defining its relative strength indicators compared to the rest of the countries of the region:⁴

- ▶ 1. Demographic strength: Its total population is twice the total population of the other two countries in the region (Georgia and Armenia).
- ▶ 2. Its area is equivalent to 87% of the total area of the two countries.
- ▶ 3. The GDP of the two countries is equal to about 62% of the total GDP of Azerbaijan.
- ▶ 4. The military expenditure of Azerbaijan is more than double the military expenditure of the two countries together.



When examining the strategic value of Azerbaijan from the Israeli perspective, we will find that it is:⁵

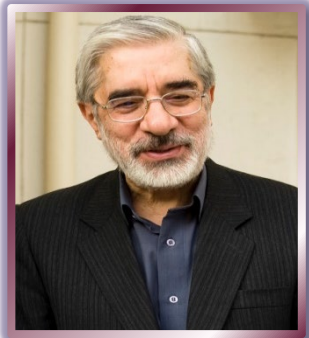
- ▶ 1. A country geographically adjacent to Iran, which Israel considers one of the main sources of threat to its security.
- ▶ 2. An Islamic state with majority of the population from the Shiite sect whose followers constitute the most significant threat to Israeli security.
- ▶ 3. A country that possesses important energy resources and advanced technological capabilities in the military and civil sectors.
- ▶ 4. A country which belongs to the Caucasus region, overlooks the Caspian Sea and is bordered by Russia, Armenia, Georgia and Turkey (through the Nakhchivan crossing), in addition to Iran.

In this paper, we will try to explore the details of the strategic value of Azerbaijan from the Israeli perspective based on the four dimensions above.



First: The Geographic Proximity to Iran⁶

The international border between Azerbaijan and Iran extends to about 765 kilometers. There is also an overlap of ethnic origins between Azerbaijan and Iran, especially since Iranians of Azeri origin make up between 16–20% (between 14–18 million) of the total population in Iran. Both Iran and Azerbaijan lead the countries with the highest percentage of Shiite population. Mir-Hossein Mousavi, the most prominent Iranian dissident and the Prime Minister of Iran throughout the Iran-Iraq war 1981–1988, was one of the prominent Azeri Shiite figures in the Iranian political scene and the Supreme Leader in Iran, Ali Khamenei, has Azeri roots. Also, the two countries have historical conflicts of a geographical nature, and there is a sharp hostile stance from Azerbaijan towards Hezbollah in Lebanon. The preceding constitutes a favorable environment for Israel to improve its relations with Azerbaijan, and if we take into account that Israel has extensive and growing relations with Azerbaijan, as we will explain, and with most of the Arab Gulf countries and with Turkey, we will understand the Israeli motives for trying to approach the Iranian border in response to Iran’s approach to



Mir-Hossein Mousavi



Ali Khamenei



the borders of occupied Palestine in Gaza, Lebanon and Syria, in what could be called mutual encirclement between Israel and Iran.

Azerbaijan was among the first countries to break away from the Soviet Union in announcing diplomatic relations with Israel on 7/4/1992, only about a hundred days after the official announcement of the end of the Soviet Union as a state.⁷ The following year, Israel opened its embassy in Baku (the capital of Azerbaijan), although the Azerbaijani side first kept the matter at the level of diplomatic relations through institutional dialogue, and the opening of the Azerbaijani embassy in Tel Aviv was delayed until November 2022.⁸

It is necessary to note that Azerbaijan represents an alternative air crossing to connect East Asia and Europe via the Caspian Sea should there be need to bypass the Russian and Iranian air corridor.

All these considerations appear clearly in a statement by the Azeri President Ilham Aliyev, in 2009, who described the Israeli-Azerbaijani relations 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.⁹



Ilham Aliyev



The cooperation between the Israeli and Azerbaijani sides included the military aspects, especially after 2010; selling weapons, modernizing old Azeri weapons, exchanging intelligence information, resisting the so-called terrorist organizations, cooperation in the areas of controlling the Azeri borders, developing airports in addition

to training the security and military forces, etc. Indeed, Azerbaijan reached a deal with Israel to purchase the Iron Dome missile defense system in response to Armenia's purchase of Russian Iskander missiles since 2016, not to mention that there are numerous reports of Israel using Azeri air bases.

Specialized studies indicate that throughout 2011–2016, Azeri arms purchases from Israel was equivalent to 27%, but throughout 2016–2020, the percentage jumped to 69% of the total Azeri arms deals, which is equivalent to 17% of total Israeli arms sales thus making Azerbaijan the second customer of the Israeli military industry after India.



Other sources indicate that Israel is seeking to exploit the border between Iran and Azerbaijan to smuggle dissident cells and to set up spy stations that monitor Iranian internal arena. Also, cooperation in the field of agriculture and water desalination is clearly increasing, especially after the two sides agreed in 2021 to form official offices of diplomatic status for cooperation in this field.

Former Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman stated that “Azerbaijan is more important for Israel than France.”¹⁰ Referring to the security and secret nature of relations between his country and Israel, Azeri President Ilham Aliyev compared these relations to an iceberg “nine-tenths of which is below the surface,” that is, secret.¹¹



Avigdor Lieberman

Second: Azerbaijan is an Islamic Country

The map of the Islamic world shows that non-Arab Islamic countries that are members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and do not recognize Israel are ten countries, mostly Sunni, while only one Islamic country with a Shiite majority recognizes Israel and this country is Azerbaijan. This is for Israel is a violation of the Shiite position regarding it,¹² especially since the prevailing trend among Shiites in most countries with a Shiite majority rejects the recognition of Israel (Iran, Bahrain and Iraq). Besides, there are countries with significant Shiite minorities, such as Pakistan (more than 33 million Shiites), India (11 million) and Afghanistan (6 million), but opinion polls in these countries indicate a Shiite majority refusing to recognize Israel.¹³ Hence, Israel wants to present through Azerbaijan a cooperative model with the Shiite community, making it attractive to other Shiites, especially since the Shiites in Azerbaijan constitute

about 85% of the population¹⁴ (some sources indicate 65–70%),¹⁵ and there are about 30 countries that have Shiites exceeding 10% of the population. This explains the importance of the relation with Azerbaijan as it is a breach of the Islamic environment in general, and the Shiite one in particular, not to mention that the Shiites in Georgia (which has borders with Azerbaijan reaching 428 km) are about 20% of the population.¹⁶ Israel seeks to promote these facts.¹⁷



In addition, Israel is trying to deepen its relation with Azerbaijan by employing its rapidly growing relations with Turkey. In this respect, the following can be noted:

- ▶ 1. Israel is seeking to strengthen its relations with Azerbaijan through Turkey given the Turkish ethnic and cultural origins of an important proportion of the Azerbaijanis.
- ▶ 2. The improvement of Israeli relations with both Turkey and Azerbaijan will facilitate Israel's access to the Caspian Sea and facilitate the transportation of Azeri oil and gas to Israel via Turkey.
- ▶ 3. The Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict over some regions and borders has provided an opportunity for both Israel and Turkey for more coordination, to increase their support for Azerbaijan, which contributed to achieving Azerbaijani victories over Armenia in their battles in September 2020.¹⁸ Israel provided Azerbaijan with about 60% of artillery ammunition and drones, along with Turkish aid to Azerbaijan.¹⁹
- ▶ 4. The development of the Israeli-Azerbaijani-Turkish relation makes it easier for Israel to communicate with the Jewish minority in Azerbaijan counting for about 25–30 thousand people, most of whom live in and around the capital, Baku.²⁰

Third: Energy Relations Between Israel and Azerbaijan

Various sources indicate that, until the beginning of the Ukrainian-Russian war in February 2022, Azerbaijan provided 40% of the energy needs (oil and gas) for Israel, especially through the Baku (Azerbaijan)-Tbilisi (Georgia)-Ceyhan (Turkey) pipeline. With the increasing blockade against Russia, especially in the area of supplying the West with its energy needs, the importance of Azerbaijan has increased to compensate that Russian energy supply. The Israeli ambassador to the Azerbaijani capital in February 2022, George Deek, stated that Israel hoped its companies to be part of renewable energy projects in Azerbaijan, as Israel is a world leader in green energy technology. He added that 10-15 Israeli companies had applied through the embassy to be parts of projects in Karabakh, and a “higher number of companies from Israel have applied directly, not through the embassy. I assume that we’re talking about tens of companies that are applying for various projects ranging from building smart cities, to green energy, agriculture, building a hospital, spa treatment center.”²¹



George Deek

Until 2021, the trade between the two countries had been about \$200 million,²² and in 2021, the two countries’ trade turnover totaled \$928.4 million.²³

Fourth: Strategic Employment of the Caucasus Region²⁴

A review of Western strategic literature during the past few decades, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union, indicates a number of strategic plans related to the Caucasus region which includes Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia and some of southern Russia, the area connecting the Black and Caspian Seas. The project of expanding the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), south and east, was put forward by the US representative to NATO Council Nicholas Burns in Prague in 2003, suggesting the expansion south and east. The project was linked to the strategy of building the Greater Middle East, which was put forward for the first time in 1995 by the US Army’s Joint Force Quarterly, which would include the Middle East as defined by Shimon Peres in his book in 1993, adding to it the expansion towards Central Asia, including the Caucasus sub-region.²⁵



Nicholas Burns



In this context, since 2017 and after Donald Trump became president, political circles have circulated the concept of “Arab NATO,” and then Israel was shifted from the US European Command (EUCOM) to the Central Command (CENTCOM) whose work covers Central Asia and the Caucasus, which means moving Israel from the circle of Europe to a circle shared with Middle Eastern and Caucasian countries, mainly Azerbaijan. If we add to that Turkey, the official member of NATO, the strategic importance of Azerbaijan for NATO, Israel and the US becomes clear, especially since Azerbaijan have signed the Partnership for Peace Framework Document with NATO in 1994.



Donald Trump

Israeli literature in this regard indicates that this strategy seeks to:²⁶

- ▶ 1. Encircle and monitor Iran and maintain pressure on it in cooperation with Western countries.
 - ▶ 2. Form a base for cooperation based on “Azerbaijan’s energy, Türkiye’s resources, and Israel’s technology.”
 - ▶ 3. Contribute, within the framework of the Western strategy, to obstructing Russian, Chinese, and Iranian cooperation in this region, especially with the growing Israeli relations with the rest of Central Asia, namely Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.
- A composite image showing the national flags of China (top), Russia (left), and Iran (right) arranged in a triangular pattern. The Chinese flag features yellow stars on a red field, the Russian flag has horizontal stripes of white, blue, and red, and the Iranian flag has a white field with a red emblem and green and red borders containing Arabic calligraphy.
- ▶ 4. Expand through the relation with Turkey and Azerbaijan to the countries of Central Asia, especially those in the International Organization of Turkic Culture (established in 1993), to limit the Iranian endeavor to expand in this region. For Iran has established in 1992 the Organization of Persian Language which includes, besides Iran, Tajikistan and Afghanistan, not to mention its relations with Central Asian countries through the Economic Cooperation Organization.²⁷
 - ▶ 5. Prevent the occurrence of two possibilities: the return of some Central Asian and Caucasus countries to the Russian circle, and the establishment of countries with Islamic regimes hostile to Israel and the West whether in the Caucasus or Central Asia in general.
 - ▶ 6. Exploit Azerbaijan’s need for US support in particular and Western support in general, especially with Azerbaijan’s feeling that the Christian West is more sympathetic to Armenia in the regional conflict between them. Thus, Israel would employ Jewish pressure groups in the West to support Azerbaijan, which Israel can exploit to gain more influence in Azerbaijan.

- 7. Some of the Gulf's pivot to the East might increase the strategic value of Azerbaijan for Israel in case of the "laxity of normalization" of the Gulf with Israel, and the possibility that, after the Iranian-Gulf rapprochement, Arab Gulf states will not allow the facilitation of Israeli activities against Iran from their lands, especially if an Iranian-Israeli confrontation takes place. Apparently, such developments increase the strategic value of Azerbaijan by virtue of its proximity to Iran.

Conclusion

Due to the data referred to above, especially as Azerbaijan produces strategic commodities (oil and gas), Israel attached to this country a high strategic value in its foreign policy and sought to deepen relations with it to secure a source of energy and to get closer to the Iranian geography in response to Iran's approaching its geography. Israel also sought to employ the Israeli relation with a predominantly Shiite society in an attempt to attract the Shiite street abroad towards Israel and to deepen the rift between the Shiite bloc in Azerbaijan and its counterpart in Iran, mainly since they are the two countries with the highest percentage of Shiite populations. In addition, Israel would exploit its relations with Turkey and some Central Asian countries along with Azerbaijan to invest in international competition, especially between the Russian-Chinese-Iranian axis and the Western axis, and the attempts to expand the NATO in this region, not to mention the importance of the region as a security space for Russia on the one hand, and the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), on the other hand.



Accordingly, Azeri-Iranian relations are candidate for some instability, which provides Israel with a political opportunity to put more pressure on Iran, and the developments in the Azeri-Turkish and Azeri-Israeli relations may curb some tensions in Turkish-Israeli relations, as happened in earlier periods. In addition, the continuation of the Gulf turn to the East, especially if Saudi Arabia joins the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa group (BRICS), will increase Israel's keenness to strengthen relations with Azerbaijan.



Endnotes

- ¹ An expert in futures studies, a former professor in the Department of Political Science at Yarmouk University in Jordan and a holder of Ph.D. in Political Science from Cairo University. He is also a former member of the Board of Trustees of Al-Zaytoonah University of Jordan, Irbid National University, the National Center for Human Rights, the Board of Grievances and the Supreme Council of Media. He has authored 37 books, most of which are focused on future studies in both theoretical and practical terms, and published 120 research papers in peer-reviewed academic journals.
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