

Azerbaijan-Israel Strengthened Partnership and its Implications for Regional Geopolitics

Nina Miholjčić Ivković*

In recent years, Azerbaijani-Israeli strategic ties have been fostered by frequent high-level diplomatic visits, as well as bilateral agreements that underline strong economic and political bonds between the two countries that imply a long-lasting, valuable partnership. This article explores the reasons behind the strengthened cooperation between Azerbaijan and Israel, reasons that range from strategic and political to energy and economic factors. The article further examines the impact of such a partnership on the geopolitical tendencies in the Middle East, in particular Iran's response. While the strengthened Azerbaijani-Israeli collaboration across various fields has been mutually beneficial for both countries, it has met with harsh criticism from Iran, which interprets such cooperation as a serious threat to its security. Undoubtedly, recent relations between Azerbaijan and Israel have raised some concerns about security issues, as well as discussions on the potential expansion of cooperation in the Middle East. The partnership has reverberated within the geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East in various ways, ranging from Iran's shifting foreign policy strategy that seeks to undermine the blossoming Azerbaijani-Israeli relationship to the potential development of a stronger relationship between Israel and Türkiye.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, Israel, Middle East, Iran, South Caucasus, Türkiye



* **Nina Miholjčić Ivković** is an international relations specialist with a strong focus on the strategic analysis of the foreign policies of the South Caucasus, Russia, and Central Asia.

Introduction

The current geopolitical situation in the Middle East and the South Caucasus, as well as the course of global politics, has encouraged certain states within these regions to strategically plan their alliances and pursuit of foreign policy objectives. Azerbaijan and Israel perceive each other as strategically important partners in a highly complex and volatile environment that requires carefully planned diplomatic efforts aimed at achieving and protecting national interests and security. Although Azerbaijan and Israel have been fostering good relations ever since the former gained independence in 1991, recent regional political developments have inspired even greater collaboration between these

Azerbaijan and Israel perceive each other as strategically important partners in a highly complex and volatile environment that requires carefully planned diplomatic efforts aimed at achieving and protecting national interests and security.

two countries. The security issues that both countries have faced and the need for broader diplomatic and economic reach are contributing to elevated Azerbaijani–Israeli cooperation.

Even though an evolving relationship between the Jewish state and a small, energy-rich Muslim country in the South Caucasus may represent an odd partnership, this alliance has a deep logic, and a more profound analysis of current geopolitical developments in the neighbourhoods of both countries proves this collaboration to be justifiable and necessary.¹ In terms of mutually beneficial bilateral relations, Azerbaijan and Israel represent compatible partners. For instance, Azerbaijan is Israel's major oil supplier, supplying 40% of the country's energy needs, while the State of Israel exports high-tech weaponry such as drones, artillery rockets and missile interceptor systems to Azerbaijan, positioning itself as one of Azerbaijan's largest weapon suppliers.² In addition to such convenient reasons for cooperation, both countries have troubling relations with Iran and desire to mitigate threats coming from the Islamic Republic. Azerbaijan and Israel perceive political Islam and its expression in the Islamic fundamentalism that constitutes the basis of Iran's system of governance as a serious threat.³

1 Abbasov, N. and Souleimanov, E., "Azerbaijan, Israel, and Iran: An Unlikely Triangle Shaping the Northern Middle East", *Middle East Policy*, 6 March 2022, available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/mepo.12611> (accessed: 10 September 2023).

2 Muradov, M. and Guliyev, I., "Azerbaijan-Israel Relations Shifting the Geopolitics of the Middle East", *Geopolitical Monitor*, 26 May 2023, available at: <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/azerbaijan-israel-relations-reach-a-new-level/> (accessed: 13 September 2023).

3 Hashemi, A., "Warming Israel-Azerbaijan Ties and the Iranian Ire They Stoke", *Hudson*

Official Baku and Tel Aviv are keen to continue expanding bilateral cooperation, especially due to the complex and hostile neighbourhoods that both nations are situated in. Azerbaijan, as the only country in the world neighbouring both Russia and Iran, has to be cautious in its foreign policy behaviour while actively seeking partners to strengthen its position and interests. Israel is also interested in expanding its political and economic ties outside the Middle East, a region with a far from friendly orientation towards the Jewish state. The recent opening of Azerbaijan's embassy in Israel displayed the willingness of the two states to take their relationship to the next level, even if that means further antagonizing Iran.⁴

The increased partnership between Azerbaijan and Israel, besides bringing advantages for both countries, has also affected regional geopolitical dynamics. In the first place, it has caused security concerns in the highest-ranking Iranian political circles and heightened the diplomatic rhetoric emanating from the Iranian establishment. However, it has also opened an opportunity for Israel–Türkiye rapprochement and the idea of establishing a trilateral alliance between Azerbaijan, Israel, and Türkiye. Azerbaijan and Israel's close relationship encouraged recent Israel–Türkiye rapprochement, especially during the Second Karabakh War in 2020, when Türkiye and Israel aided Azerbaijan and realized the benefits of cooperation.⁵

In times of changing geopolitical trends in the Middle East, with increasing hostility of Iran towards Israel and the Turkish-Israeli rapprochement that was initiated, but has been hindered by the recent Israeli military operation in Gaza, the Azerbaijani–Israeli strategic partnership has become the centre of attention as an atypical alliance that brings new regional perspectives.

Mutually Beneficial Bilateral Relations

The Azerbaijan–Israel strategic partnership relies on the mutual advantages of forming strong security and economic bilateral

Institute, 6 February 2023, available at: <https://www.hudson.org/security-alliances/warming-israel-azerbaijan-ties-iranian-ire-they-stoke> (accessed: 13 September 2023).

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

The Azerbaijan–Israel strategic partnership relies on the mutual advantages of forming strong security and economic bilateral relations between the two nations.

relations between the two nations.⁶ Due to unstable environments with numerous security issues, these two countries have concluded that their compatible needs and interests, in addition to their pragmatic foreign policies, motivate a valuable alliance that provides mutual political and economic benefits. On one hand, Azerbaijan purchases and imports Israeli military equipment and training, which makes Israel a

perfect partner for this tiny South Caucasus country that faces hostility from its immediate neighbour, Armenia. On the other hand, Israel finds Azerbaijan's energy resources valuable and necessary for satisfying its energy needs. Even though the Arab states of the Middle East surrounding Israel are rich in oil and gas, troubled relations and often hostile attitudes prevent energy collaboration, while Azerbaijan offers more economically viable energy imports that contribute to stronger Azerbaijani–Israeli energy ties.⁷

Azerbaijan pursues a foreign policy that is oriented to expanding the country's ties beyond its immediate neighbourhood and obtaining strategically compatible allies that can help the country strengthen its position in the South Caucasus and reduce the influence of regional powers such as Russia and Iran. Ever since it gained independence, Azerbaijan has been open to extending its network of partners and gathering support for re-establishing the country's territorial integrity.

Israel possesses advanced technological capabilities, especially in the military area, and a Western-oriented policy that is highly appreciated by and attractive to Azerbaijan.⁸ Moreover, the close relationship between the two countries has been buttressed with historic and cultural bonds. Azerbaijan is home to the last remaining Jewish community in the Caucasus, settled in the northern district of Guba, and a community of European Jews who have been residing mostly in the Baku area since the late 19th century.⁹ Especially important to Azerbaijan has been Jewish advocacy that has acted as a counterbalance to the Armenian

6 Mehdiyade, S., "Azerbaijan and Israel: A Strategic Alliance in the Middle East", *Aze. Media*, 25 July 2023, available at: <https://aze.media/azerbaijan-and-israel-a-strategic-alliance-in-the-middle-east/#introduction> (accessed: 20 September 2023).

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Muradov, M. and Guliyev, I., *op. cit.*

diaspora and its lobbying in the USA and contributed to deepening Azerbaijani-Israeli political relations.¹⁰ For instance, it has been argued that the assistance of American Jewish organizations contributed to an executive waiver of Section 907 of the 1992 Freedom Support Act, a measure that had restricted any kind of direct US aid to Azerbaijan because of the First Karabakh War.¹¹

The State of Israel, viewed as an outcast by many Arab states in the region as well as Iran, has been keen on expanding the country's ties outside the Middle East for the purpose of satisfying not only its energy needs but also its diplomatic and strategic interests. Although Israel's connection to Azerbaijan is mostly related to the energy sector, over the years these two countries have developed strong economic cooperation in many other fields ranging from agriculture, tourism, telecommunications, and heavy machinery to high-tech industries.¹² Despite pressure and criticism levelled at official Baku and Tel Aviv regarding their strengthened collaboration, the benefits of such economic and strategic partnership counterbalance Iran's criticism.

Deepening Azerbaijani-Israeli relations have been marked by high-level official visits in both countries, as well as the establishment of the Azerbaijani embassy in Tel Aviv. Diplomatic visits have particularly intensified following the end of the Second Karabakh War and the announcement of the opening of the embassy. For instance, Israel's Intelligence Minister, Gila Gamliel, visited Baku before Azerbaijan's Foreign Minister, Jeyhun Bayramov, paid a visit to Israel for the Embassy's opening ceremony in March 2023. Furthermore, Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen visited Azerbaijan in April 2023. However, one of the most important diplomatic visits that further confirmed the thriving relationship between Baku and Tel Aviv occurred on May 30, 2023, when Israeli President Isaac Herzog visited Azerbaijan to meet

10 Motamedi, M., "Analysis: Will Azerbaijan-Iran tensions lead to war?", *Aljazeera*, 8 April 2023, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/4/8/analysis-will-azerbaijan-iran-tensions-lead-to-war> (accessed: 20 September 2023).

11 Sultanova, S., "In Muslim Azerbaijan, Self-Interest Prompts Support for Israel on Gaza", *Eurasianet*, 7 August 2014, available at: <https://eurasianet.org/in-muslim-azerbaijan-self-interest-prompts-support-for-israel-on-gaza> (accessed: 11 November 2023).

12 Göksel, O., "Beyond Countering Iran: A Political Economy of Azerbaijan-Israel Relations", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 42(4), pp. 655–675, 29 May 2015, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2015.1048973> (accessed: 21 September 2023).

with his Azerbaijani counterpart President Ilham Aliyev to discuss the broadening of cooperation between the two states in various fields as well as to address potential threats emanating from Iran.¹³

Iran's Response and the Shifting Geopolitics of the Middle East

Azerbaijan and Israel's atypical alliance is based not only on mutually beneficial economic incentives but also on the hostility of and security threats posed by the Islamic Republic of Iran.¹⁴ Iran has been strongly opposed to a close Azerbaijani–Israeli relationship from its inception in the early 1990s. The Iranian government has been extremely concerned about enhanced military cooperation between Baku and Tel Aviv. In particular, during the Second Karabakh War in 2020, when Israel supported Azerbaijan with high-tech weaponry, Tehran perceived that Israel was preparing attacks on Iran using Azerbaijan's territory and airspace.¹⁵ Such concerns remain present to this day among the Iranian political elite and continue to shape the country's foreign policy towards its northern neighbour.¹⁶ Moreover, Iranian officials allege that the presence of Israeli agricultural companies in the regained Zangilan, Jabrayil and Fuzuli districts bordering Iran is a convenient cover for spying and reconnaissance.¹⁷ Iran condemns not only military cooperation between Azerbaijan and Israel but also economic collaboration, due to concerns that Tel Aviv has dishonest intentions and is always seeking opportunities to harm the Islamic Republic.

The hostile relations between Iran and Israel that date from the 1979

13 Hasanoglu, E., "3 QUESTIONS - Diplomatic relations between Azerbaijan, Israel", *Anadolu Agency*, 17 June 2023, available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/3-questions-diplomatic-relations-between-azerbaijan-israel/2916339> (accessed: 13 November 2023).

14 Souleimanov, E., Ehrmann, M. and Aliyev, H., "Focused on Iran? Exploring the rationale behind the strategic relationship between Azerbaijan and Israel", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 14(4), pp. 471-488, 21 October 2014, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2014.967945> (accessed: 23 September 2023).

15 Kaleji, V., "The Israel Factor as a 'Third Party' in Growing Tensions Between Iran and Azerbaijan", *The Jamestown Foundation*, 8 May 2023, available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/tehran-worried-about-israel-factor-in-growing-tensions-between-iran-and-azerbaijan/> (accessed: 23 September 2023).

16 Scollon, M., "Iran's Relations With Azerbaijan Get Heated Over Attacks, Baku's Ties To Israel", *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, 8 June 2023, available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-azerbaijan-fraying-relations/32450502.html> (accessed: 11 November 2023).

17 Ibid.

Islamic revolution have been deteriorating over the years while enhanced Azerbaijani–Israeli cooperation has further worsened Tehran–Tel Aviv relations. Azerbaijan and Israel’s close relationship is in accordance with Israel’s ‘Periphery Doctrine’, a strategic plan that favours alliances with non-Arab nations on the fringes of the Middle East.¹⁸ While Israeli foreign policy doctrine has been pursuing partners with common economic and security interests, Iran has remained extremely cautious of such endeavours, perceiving Israel’s interest in Azerbaijan as a way to surreptitiously achieve geographical proximity to Iranian territory. The Iranian government believes that Tel Aviv’s main goal in pursuing enhanced cooperation with Baku is to collect intelligence and plan military attacks on Iran from Azerbaijan’s territory.¹⁹ Such constant, yet paranoid, fear of potential attacks has made Iran highly critical of the Azerbaijani–Israeli partnership.

The aftermath of the Second Karabakh War confirmed the strong and developing relationship between Baku and Tel Aviv, and even saw a normalization of relations between Israel and Armenia just a year after the war.

The aftermath of the Second Karabakh War confirmed the strong and developing relationship between Baku and Tel Aviv, and even saw a normalization of relations between Israel and Armenia just a year after the war. In 2021, Armenia appointed a new Armenian ambassador to Israel after it had previously recalled its ambassador from Tel Aviv following the end of the war.²⁰ In contrast, Iran reacted to enhanced Azerbaijani–Israeli cooperation by holding regular and extensive military exercises along its northwestern borders with Azerbaijan.²¹ Iran alleged that the purpose of such military drills was to protect Iran’s borders and territory from the increased Israeli presence and possible military action.²² The latest incident involved a terrorist attack against Azerbaijan’s Embassy in Tehran that resulted in the death of an Azerbaijani security guard and left two embassy security employees wounded. This evidenced the rising hostility towards Azerbaijan that has been cultivated in Iran, especially since the Second Karabakh War and the strengthening of the Azerbaijan–Israel strategic partnership.²³

18 Mehdizade, *op. cit.*

19 Ibid.

20 Kaleji, *op. cit.*

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Muradov, M. and Guliyev, I., *op. cit.*

Recent shifts in Iran's foreign policy could necessitate greater collaboration between Azerbaijan and Israel. Iran has started pursuing an eastern-oriented foreign policy that aims at improving the country's economic and diplomatic relationship with China and other Asian countries. Within the Gulf region, Iran seeks to embrace a more conciliatory course in order to reduce tensions with its neighbours.²⁴ Iran has started pursuing a more interactive and multi-vector foreign policy in the Middle East to strengthen its position and power in the region and counter Israel's growing influence. Recent Iran–Saudi Arabia rapprochement is an example of such proactive Iranian geopolitical endeavours. The Iranian regime has also started fostering good relations with Russia, especially in the military area, which has been perceived by the West and Israel as a potentially grave security threat. Russo–Iranian cooperation has increased during the Ukrainian crisis while the rise of anti-Western sentiment has been evident in both countries.²⁵ These new developments in Iran's foreign policy are reasons for possible concern to both Azerbaijan and Israel, which can respond through greater collaboration and cautious diplomatic efforts to ease the existing tension in the region.

A Regional Trilateral Alliance

While Iran has been strongly against the Azerbaijani–Israeli alliance, Türkiye has been more open to cooperating with the Jewish state and flexible when it comes to safeguarding its interests and stability in the region. Türkiye–Israel relations have witnessed increased collaboration recently. For instance, both countries were actively involved in detecting an Iranian cell reportedly targeting Israeli tourists in Istanbul.²⁶ Moreover, Israel provided humanitarian aid to the victims

24 Salami, M., "What the West Can Expect of Iranian Foreign Policy in 2022", *Gulf International Fund*, 10 March 2022, available at: <https://gulif.org/what-the-west-can-expect-of-iranian-foreign-policy-in-2022/> (accessed: 25 September 2023).

25 Geranmayeh, E. and Grajewski N., "Alone together: How the war in Ukraine shapes the Russian–Iranian relationship", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 6 September 2023, available at: <https://ecfr.eu/publication/alone-together-how-the-war-in-ukraine-shapes-the-russian-iranian-relationship/> (accessed: 25 September 2023).

26 Arab News, *Turkey busts Iranian cell targeting Israeli tourists: report*, 23 June 2023, available at: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2109271/middle-east> (accessed: 11 November 2023).

of a devastating earthquake in Türkiye.²⁷ In addition, the 2020 Abraham Accords that opened a space for Israeli–Muslim regional reconciliation have forced the Turkish government to reconsider its foreign policy and make efforts towards restoring its relationship with the Jewish state and participating Arab nations.²⁸

The Second Karabakh War was one of the powerful influencing events in Israeli–Turkish relations. Ankara and Tel Aviv supported Azerbaijan during the war and consequently increased their mutual collaboration. Some analyses have concluded that Azerbaijan can play a potential bridging role in the normalization process between Israel and Türkiye,²⁹ and that Baku possesses unifying abilities between these two countries that have a history of strained relations.³⁰ Azerbaijani officials have shown a willingness to act as initiators and hosts of a trilateral summit with Israel and Türkiye to repair and strengthen regional relations.³¹ Azerbaijan has been more than supportive of the idea of restoring ties between its closest allies, especially given the shifting geopolitics of the region and growing tensions and threats emanating from the Islamic Republic.

The ongoing deadly Israeli military operation that followed Hamas' recent surprise attack from Gaza has shocked the world, especially Muslim countries in the immediate and wider neighbourhood.³² Türkiye's government, a vocal advocate of the Palestinian cause, has expressed concerns and directed criticism against Israel.³³ Following

27 Boms, N. and Rosenthal, J., "Regional Crisis and Regional Cooperation: Israeli Response to the Earthquake in Syria and Turkey", The Washington Institute, 6 March 2023, available at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/regional-crisis-and-regional-cooperation-israeli-response-earthquake-syria-and> (accessed: 11 November 2023).

28 Yanarocak, H. E. C., "The game changers in Israeli-Turkish relations", *JISS*, 28 September 2023, available at: <https://jiss.org.il/en/yanarocak-the-game-changers-inisraeli-turkish-relations/> (accessed: 26 September 2023).

29 Muradov, M. and Guliyev, I., *op. cit.*

30 Epstein, J., *op. cit.*

31 Brooks, R., "Azerbaijan, Israel, and Turkey to open to a trilateral summit", *Aze.media*, 28 April 2021, available at: <https://aze.media/azerbaijan-israel-and-turkey-to-open-to-a-trilateral-summit/> (accessed: 11 November 2023).

32 Mammadli, R., "Perspectives | Azerbaijan walks fine line as Turkey-Israel relations deteriorate", *Eurasianet*, 9 November 2023, available at: <https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-azerbaijan-walks-fine-line-as-turkey-israel-relations-deteriorate> (accessed: 11 November 2023).

33 Aljazeera, *Turkey's Erdogan scraps Israel trip over 'inhumane' Gaza war*, 25 October 2023, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/25/turkeys-erdogan-scraps->

the start of the military hostilities, Türkiye's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan cancelled a planned visit to Israel, stating that relations between the two states would not improve.³⁴ The recent escalation in Gaza will probably impede further Israeli–Turkish rapprochement as well as discussions about developing an Azerbaijan–Türkiye–Israel trilateral alliance.

Conclusion

The Azerbaijan–Israel relationship revolves around several points of interest. Economic ties involve cooperation not only in energy and military technology but also agriculture, tourism, and communication, which are the initial incentives for bringing these two nations closer together. Security concerns related to Iran's hostile foreign policies are also among the priority reasons why Azerbaijan and Israel have been developing stronger political ties. Moreover, both countries are interested in broadening their influence and reinforcing their images in their wider neighbourhoods as proactive and prosperous countries. An enhanced relationship between Baku and Tel Aviv seems to have supported accomplishing all of the indicated mutually beneficial goals.

Strong Baku–Tel Aviv diplomatic ties have been particularly elevated following the opening of Azerbaijan's embassy in Israel, and frequent high-level official visits between the two countries have only contributed to strengthening their mutual security and economic relationship. Shifting geopolitical dynamics in the Middle East have further put the focus on the Azerbaijani–Israeli alliance as an unusual yet strong partnership that ushers in a new regional perspective.

Iran remains extremely cautious of any Israeli diplomatic endeavours with any other countries, but especially with Azerbaijan, which brings Israeli presence and influence close to the Islamic Republic's borders. Tensions between Tehran and Baku have been on the rise recently, and Iran's shifting foreign policy has only added to the already existing security concerns of Azerbaijan. The Islamic Republic has been fostering stronger relations with Russia and China while also repairing

israel-trip-over-inhumane-gaza-war (accessed: 12 November 2023).

34 Aljazeera, *Turkey's Erdogan scraps Israel trip over 'inhumane' Gaza war*, 25 October 2023, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/25/turkeys-erdogan-scraps-israel-trip-over-inhumane-gaza-war> (accessed: 12 November 2023).

relationships with its Arab neighbours. Such diplomatic efforts have caused concerns, especially among Israeli and Azerbaijani officials, who have been looking for ways to concurrently expand their relationship and curb Iranian influence.

The Azerbaijan–Israel partnership has brought an opportunity for Türkiye to relax its isolated position, as has become particularly evident since the implementation of the 2020 Abraham Accords. Before Israel’s military operations, the idea of forming an Azerbaijan–Israel–Türkiye regional trilateral partnership as a way to achieve mutually beneficial interests and goals, and as protection from more powerful states and their alliances, was present on the sidelines of diplomatic talks among the three countries. However, the latest conflict in the Middle East has delayed further developments in the field of rapprochement and forming alliances.