

Israel's role in the Second Armenia-Azerbaijan War

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The Republic of Azerbaijan and the State of Israel have enjoyed extensive ties and cooperation since the restoration of Azerbaijan's independence in 1991 and strategic cooperation since the mid-1990s. This partnership played a role in Azerbaijan's success in the 2020 Second Armenia-Azerbaijan War.

This chapter will discuss Israel's role in the 2020 war and the resulting strategic implications. The cooperation between Israel and Azerbaijan in the military sphere extends beyond arms sales. Rather, Israeli security and military cooperation has played a significant role in the building of Azerbaijan's military capabilities and the establishment in Azerbaijan of a home-grown defence industry. Israeli specialists have also engaged in the training of Azerbaijani military experts on the operation of various armaments, the development of organisational methods and formulation of military doctrine. In the 2020 war, Azerbaijan demonstrated an innovative use of Israeli arms and the integration of Turkish and Israeli unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) as well as a novel use of UAVs, which included carrying out multiple tasks and their integration with other armaments in the battlefield. Military planners and strategists worldwide continue to study this integration as well as the war in general, which has been viewed as an important case study in modern warfare. In addition, the success of the Turkish and Israeli armaments and their battlefield integration in the 2020 Armenia-Azerbaijan War has led to increased commercial interest globally in both the Turkish and Israeli defence industries. The war also set the stage for important political developments, including a potential return to friendlier

political relations between Turkey and Israel, given the two countries support of Azerbaijan. Moreover, Israel's cooperation with Azerbaijan has endowed it with "soft power" among ethnic Azerbaijanis in Iran, who form a third of the Islamic Republic's population. Many ethnic Azerbaijanis in Iran expressed support for Azerbaijan during the war and thus appreciated Israel's contribution to Azerbaijan's war effort.

Major milestones in Azerbaijan-Israel relations

The State of Israel was one of the first countries to recognize (December 25, 1991) Azerbaijan's independence. Diplomatic relations were established between Israel and the Republic of Azerbaijan on April 7, 1992, and Israel established a permanent embassy in Baku on August 29, 1993. Azerbaijan has not reciprocated by opening an embassy in Israel, out of concern of losing support from the Arab and Muslim bloc in UN resolutions related to the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. However, in the wake of the 2020 war it is likely that Azerbaijan will open a full embassy in Israel. The restoration of Azerbaijani control over its territories in the 2020 war has rendered Baku less dependent on the Arab bloc at the United Nations. In addition, the establishment of diplomatic relations between Israel and several Arab and Muslim-majority states during 2020-21 as part of the Abraham Accord process and their subsequent opening of embassies has clearly lowered the potential ramifications for Baku in opening an embassy in Israel. In July 2021, Azerbaijan opened tourism and trade missions in Israel. The Azerbaijani representatives at these missions have diplomatic status. Further diplomatic openings between Azerbaijan and Israel are likely.¹

In the mid-1990s, cooperation between Israel and the Republic of Azerbaijan deepened. Azerbaijan and Israel forged deep strategic ties and maintained open high-level contacts. Former Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev met with several Israeli Prime Ministers including Yitzhak Rabin, Benjamin Netanyahu (including a short working visit to Baku in August 1997), and Ehud Barak. Current President Ilham Aliyev has held frequent meetings with Israeli leaders, including hosting

President Shimon Peres for a State visit and hosting Prime Minister Netanyahu in December 2016. Israeli Defence Minister Moshe Yaalon made an open visit to Azerbaijan in 2014,² and in September 2017, the Minister of Defence Zakir Hasanov of Azerbaijan openly reciprocated.³ Further indications of the closeness of relations between Azerbaijan and Israel include the Israel-Azerbaijan Inter-Ministerial Commission's first meeting in Jerusalem on May 14, 2018, the day that the United States opened its embassy in Jerusalem. Despite pressure from many Muslim-majority countries for Azerbaijan to cancel the meeting in Jerusalem in light of the U.S. decision, the Azerbaijani delegation held the meeting as planned. The Commission held its second meeting in April 2021.⁴

In the economic sphere, Israel has been among Azerbaijan's top five trade partners for most of the post-Soviet period. Azerbaijan is Israel's top oil supplier, delivering both crude and refined products, and providing around 30-40 percent of Israel's annual consumption, depending on the year. Israeli imports represent approximately 10 percent of Azerbaijan's oil exports. The oil trade between Azerbaijan and Israel takes place via direct sales from SOCAR to Israeli refineries and via European oil traders. As a result, bilateral trade data does not fully reflect the volume of oil trade between Azerbaijan and Israel. Azerbaijan supplies oil to Israel via the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline and by regular tanker sailings from the Turkish port at Ceyhan to the refineries in Haifa and Ashdod. These oil supplies have never been disrupted, including in periods of very rocky relations between Israel and Turkey. In 2012-13, A SOCAR subsidiary, Caspian Drilling Company, undertook oil and natural gas exploration in Israel's offshore Exclusive Economic Zone (EEC) near the Israeli city of Ashdod. This was SOCAR's first exploration project outside of the Caspian Sea basin. The exploration activity ultimately yielded small oil discoveries, which were not commercially relevant.

In addition, Azerbaijan's national airline AZAL has had regular flights to Tel Aviv since 1993. When most foreign carriers stopped flights to

Israel during the 2014 Operation Protective Edge, AZAL was one of the few carriers that continued to fly to Israel.

Azerbaijan has been home to a Jewish community for over 2,500 years. Today, most of the members of this community live in Baku and the northern region of Quba. This community numbers approximately 30,000,⁵ which makes the Jewish community in Azerbaijan the largest in the Muslim world today. The Jewish community of Azerbaijan is comprised of several groups, including Mountain Jews (this group of Jews hails mainly from Azerbaijan and Russia's north Caucasus), Georgian Jews, and Ashkenazi Jews. There has been no history of anti-Semitism in Azerbaijan. In addition, Jews that escaped the Nazi conquests of other parts of the USSR found refuge in Azerbaijan during the Holocaust. Azerbaijani Jews enjoy safety and freedom of worship and culture. As part of the general state policy toward minorities that allows all groups to operate schools in their native languages in Azerbaijan, Jews can operate schools that teach Jewish culture and Hebrew. President Aliyev visits Jewish community institutions in Quba annually and issues regular greetings on Jewish holidays and an annual solidarity statement on Holocaust Remembrance Day. Emigres from Azerbaijan to Israel play an important role in the commercial and cultural exchanges between Israel and Azerbaijan. Every summer, during the Jewish holiday of Tisha B'Av, the community of Mountain Jews in Azerbaijan and its diaspora (mostly from Israel, Russia and the United States) gather together in the Jewish town of Qirmizi Qesebe in the Quba region of northern Azerbaijan to rekindle communal ties and celebrate their culture. The event is used to encourage marriages between Mountain Jews and thus continuity of the community and its unique culture. Furthermore, Azerbaijani state universities and schools study the history of the Holocaust as part of their regular curricula. The Azerbaijan State University of Foreign Languages has a department of Israel Studies and gives degrees that include study of the Hebrew language.

Since the restoration of Azerbaijan's independence in 1991, leading American Jewish organisations have enthusiastically embraced relations with the Republic of Azerbaijan and many of the groups express support for strong relations between Washington and Baku, as well as triangular cooperation with Israel. The Republic of Azerbaijan's policies have made it easy for American Jewish organisations to embrace the cause of Azerbaijan. Moreover, the fact that Azerbaijan is a Muslim-majority state with no history of anti-Semitism that celebrates the existence of its Jewish and Christian communities, its geographic location and shared ethnic Azerbaijani population with Iran, its consequent strategic importance for Middle East security, and Baku's friendly policies toward Israel have all facilitated US Jewish support for Azerbaijan.

Iran's reaction to Azerbaijan-Israel ties

Some analysts have explained Iran's hostility toward the Republic of Azerbaijan as a response to Baku's close ties with Israel, depicting Iran as being on the defensive in light of the cooperation between Israel and Azerbaijan. The timeline of this claim is simply not correct. Strategic cooperation between Azerbaijan and Israel commenced in 1995/1996. In contrast, Tehran has acted against Azerbaijan from the reestablishment of independence in 1991, long before Baku formed close links with Israel. Tehran's strategic disposition toward Azerbaijan is primarily rooted in its concern that a strong and prosperous Republic of Azerbaijan could rouse ethno-nationalism among Iran's own Azerbaijani community, which comprises close to a third of the population of Iran.⁶ Thus, it is unsurprising that Tehran lent support to Armenia in its conflict with Azerbaijan in hopes of keeping Baku tied down. Iran served as the main conduit of arms and supplies to Armenia during both the first Armenia-Azerbaijan War in 1992-94 and the Second Armenia-Azerbaijan War in 2020.⁷ Tehran views Jewish and Israeli institutions located in Azerbaijan as potential targets during periods when it looks to conduct violent operations against Israel. In 2012, for instance, Tehran and its proxies in Azerbaijan were accused

of plotting to assassinate the Israeli Ambassador in Baku (along with the US Ambassador to Azerbaijan Matthew Bryza).⁸ Throughout the 2010s, Iran planned several attacks on Jewish communal institutions in Azerbaijan.⁹ The Azerbaijani security services successfully foiled these attempts, likely in cooperation with US and Israeli intelligence services.

Armenia attempts to undermine Azerbaijan-Israel relations

Due to the significance of the strategic component in the relations with Azerbaijan, the Republic of Armenia and Armenian diaspora groups have targeted Israel in campaigns aimed at undermining the cooperation between Israel and the Republic of Azerbaijan. Yerevan intensified its effort to drive a wedge in Israel's relations with Azerbaijan following its strategic setback in the 2016 April "Four-Day War." This fighting marked the first time since the 1994 ceasefire that Azerbaijan succeeded in reclaiming some of its territory that had been occupied by Armenia. The Armenian diaspora community in Israel has been active in campaigns against Israel's cooperation with Azerbaijan, including holding demonstrations at Israel's Knesset (parliament). Approximately four thousand Armenians reside in Israel, half of whom live in the Armenian Quarter of Jerusalem's old city. During the 2020 war, pro-Armenia activists in Israel submitted a petition to Israel's High Court of Justice to ban Israel's arms sales to Azerbaijan, claiming that Azerbaijan was using the weapons to commit war crimes. The Israel High Court of Justice rejected the petition citing a lack of evidence.¹⁰

Decades after the establishment of diplomatic relations, in September 2020 Armenia opened an embassy in Israel and dispatched an ambassador.¹¹ When the second stage of the war emerged in late September and it became clear that Yerevan's expectations from Israel that this act would prevent Israel's cooperation with Azerbaijan did not materialize, Yerevan withdrew its ambassador from Israel in October 2020. Armenia has not returned an ambassador to Israel as of October 2021. Yerevan had calculated that with the establishment of an embassy in Tel Aviv and warmer rhetoric, it could dissuade Israel from

cooperating with Azerbaijan. An example of this Armenian assessment is found in August 2020, in between the two stages of the war, when an Armenian official remarked that through its planned opening of an embassy and other steps, Yerevan had succeeded in pivoting Israel toward Armenia and away from Azerbaijan, dramatically changing the strategic situation in the South Caucasus.

Armenia's overtures did not succeed in creating any concrete change in the strategic cooperation between Israel and Azerbaijan. Support for the cooperation between Azerbaijan and Israel runs high among the Israeli security leadership and across most of the Israeli political spectrum.

Moreover, Armenia's deep security ties with Iran preclude Israel from forging security ties with Armenia. During the 2020 Armenia-Azerbaijan war, Iran served as the main conduit of Russian arms and other supplies to Armenia. Russian ships arrived at Iran's Caspian port of Anzali and brought Russian arms and other supplies by truck into Armenia and into the battle zone. Russian supply flights to Armenia also transited Iran's airspace. Iran even directly intervened militarily in the battlefield during the 2020 War in attempt to prevent or at least slow down Baku's advance. When Azerbaijan's forces reached the province of Zangilan, which borders Iran, and were engaged in serious battles with Armenia, Iranian forces crossed the border into Azerbaijan on October 17, 2020 and placed large concrete blocks on the road in a section in Jabrayil region, close to Zangilan, cutting the Azerbaijani forces in Zangilan from supplies and reinforcements.¹² Iranian forces stayed in the Azerbaijani territory for three days, claiming they were protecting the Khudafarin hydropower plant, which they had built in cooperation with the Armenian occupation forces. Azerbaijani commanders attempted to convince the Iranian forces to leave and they refused. The Azerbaijani government brought the Iranian military attaché in from Baku to the border area to the Iranian troops there to discuss their withdrawal. Only when Baku threatened to publish the Iranian intervention in the battlefield did the Iranian forces agree to

leave and allow the removal of the concrete blocks. Likely, the Iranian forces feared publication of their intervention, since this knowledge would further incite ethnic Azerbaijanis against the regime. This roadblock succeeded to cut the Azerbaijani forces from each other and to delay arrival of reinforcements and supplies to the forces in battle in Zangilan. Accordingly, six Azerbaijani soldiers were killed due to the Iranian intervention. Azerbaijani forces used a different, longer way to join their troops in Zangilan. The delay in the arrival of the Azerbaijani forces to Zangilan also allowed the Armenians to regroup and resupply and thus indirectly led to additional Azerbaijani casualties. Iranian forces also crossed several times during the war into Nakhchivan, Azerbaijan's exclave that borders Iran.¹³ Iran also provided to Armenia information on Azerbaijani troop movements in the provinces that border Iran, which they could observe and also pickup communications of the Azerbaijani troops.¹⁴

Iran was likely also involved in the development of Armenia's tunnel warfare capacity. In 2018, Armenia adopted a new strategic doctrine of "new wars for new territories," under which Armenia would open new fronts with Azerbaijan in order to deter Baku from attempting to retake its occupied territories, newly perceived as vulnerable. The new doctrine also involved adopting a more dynamic military strategy: using offensive actions as part of its defence, and not remaining in static positions, such as trenches, but moving troops and conducting surprise attacks on Azerbaijani forces. As part of the new Armenian doctrine, Yerevan employed tunnel warfare, like Hamas and Hizballah, and built tunnels in the occupied territories, including in Zangilan at the border with Iran, and in border areas with Azerbaijan, such as Tovuz. There are indications that Armenia gained tunnel expertise from Iran's IRGC. Tunnel warfare is used extensively by Iranian proxies Hizballah and Hamas. The tunnels in the Tovuz region contributed greatly to Armenia's ability to launch a surprise attack on Azerbaijan on July 12, 2020.

Russian response to Israeli-Azerbaijan cooperation

Russia could have posed a threat to the security cooperation between Azerbaijan and Israel, as it did to the cooperation between Georgia and Israel in advance of the 2008 Georgia—Russia War. Moscow essentially forced Israel to halt arms sales and remove military advisors in Georgia in the run-up to its 2008 war with Tbilisi. In contrast to the Georgian case, however, Israeli weapons were not acquired for use against Russia, perhaps explaining Moscow's tolerance of these sales to Baku. However, Israeli supplies gave Azerbaijan a strategic edge over Armenia, Russia's ally in the region, and the fighting could have widened and escalated to the point that Russia could have directly intervened. Thus, Russia could have attempted to limit Israel's arms sales to Azerbaijan, and use levers, such as it has available in Syria, to coerce Israel into cooperating.

Azerbaijan's triumph was also a knockout victory for Western arms technology in the clash between Russian produced systems and those of NATO member Turkey and US ally Israel. Clearly, this is not positive for Russia and hurts its ability to market its armaments.

Details of Azerbaijan- Israel strategic and military cooperation

The defence relationship between Azerbaijan and Israel goes far beyond arms sales and technology transfer. The strong government-to-government component enables the successful integration of strategy, threat assessment, intelligence cooperation, and military management. Azerbaijan and Israel are strategic partners, not mere commercial partners. The relationship is viewed by the two countries as part of a wider strategic partnership based on shared interests and policy views. Some commentators assume that the arms trade is based solely on commercial factors, often crudely represented as "arms for oil" trade. However, this is inaccurate. For two and a half decades, Israel and Azerbaijan have maintained deep strategic cooperation that touches on national security issues of the highest importance to both sides. This cooperation comprises intelligence, anti-terrorism cooperation, and non-military cooperation in the fields of education, science and

economy. Among the major milestones in defence cooperation between the two countries was in February 2012, when the two countries signed an arms-supply agreement valued at \$1.6 billion, which included Israeli UAVs, anti-aircraft and missile air defence systems.¹⁵ Another major landmark came during then-Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's visit to Azerbaijan in December 2016. During Netanyahu's visit, President Aliyev announced that the two countries has signed a new major arms agreement worth approximately \$5 billion.

The contribution of Israeli arms and technology to Azerbaijan's military prowess was evident already during the April 2016 Four-Day War. During this short clash between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Israeli weapons, for the first time, played an important role in a battle zone in the Caucasus. These weapons included Harop "suicide" drones. One of the most important outcomes Israel-Azerbaijan cooperation has been the development of an indigenous defence industry in Azerbaijan. The local defence industry helped Azerbaijani forces gain expertise in the use of these weapon systems and the indigenous production capacity means that Azerbaijan is not dependent on imports for resupplies of some of its equipment during wartime. Among the domestic defence industries established in Azerbaijan in cooperation with Israel has been the manufacture of UAVs, with Azerbaijan's Azad Systems producing UAVs based on technology first developed by Israel's Aeronautics Company.

Defence cooperation during the 2020 war

The 2020 Armenia-Azerbaijan War had two stages. Stage one began on July 12 with Armenian attacks in the border area of Tovuz that sought to disrupt the security of the East-West energy and transit corridor that passes through the Tovuz region. Israeli arms, especially the Harop drones, played an important role at this stage in repulsing the Armenian incursions.¹⁶ During the next stage of the war, beginning September 27, Israeli arms along with Azerbaijani products produced with Israeli technology played a key role in the fighting. Azerbaijan's Minister of

Foreign Affairs Jeyhun Bayramov remarked: “The skillful use of high-tech and high-precision weapons, including those made in Israel, in particular, unmanned aerial vehicles, by the Azerbaijani Armed Forces played an exceptional role in Azerbaijan’s victory.”¹⁷

One of the major factors behind Azerbaijan’s battlefield success was the integration of Israeli and Turkish weapons systems. For instance, rather than using drones for single missions such as intelligence gathering or single target strikes, a common tactic, Azerbaijani forces used UAVs to perform multiple missions during a single flight. Moreover, the UAVs were integrated into the larger battle plan.¹⁸ A major factor in Azerbaijan’s success was its ability to integrate its various weapons systems. For example, through sophisticated and innovative use of UAV technology, Azerbaijan was able to incapacitate Armenia’s Russian-supplied S-300 air defence system. Some of the cases of innovative weapon and technology uses illustrate that extensive Azerbaijani pre-planning took place, and this was likely in cooperation and study with Turkish and Israeli military experts.

Israel not only provided arms and technology to Azerbaijan prior to the war, but there is also evidence that supply dispatches took place during the war. As the battles were raging, Azerbaijan’s cargo airline, Silk Way, undertook several flights from Israel to Azerbaijan, indicating that Israel likely was sending new hardware and supplies to Azerbaijan as the war progressed.

One of the most significant uses of Israeli weapons systems during the war occurred during its final days. As Armenia’s losses were mounting, Armenia launched Iskandar M missiles at targets in Azerbaijan outside the battle zone, including targeting Baku. Prior to this, Armenia had fired Iskandar E missiles, which have a shorter range, and known to be part of Armenia’s arsenal, at both military and civilian targets in Azerbaijan. It was not known that Moscow had supplied the M version, which, due to its longer range, represents a violation of the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) arms control pact, of which

Russia is a party. The Iskandar M missiles fired at Baku were intercepted by the Israeli made Barak-8 air defence system.¹⁹ Deployment of the air defence system is indicative of the high level of Israeli-Azerbaijani cooperation and would have required extensive cooperation in training the Azerbaijani military to use the system.

Political results of the Azerbaijan-Israel cooperation in the war

Israeli-Azerbaijani cooperation in the course of the 2020 Armenia-Azerbaijan War has had several political impacts, including expanding public support for Israel among Azerbaijani society, creating popular support for Israel among Iran's ethnic Azerbaijani minority, and generating conditions for the potential reestablishment of constructive relations between Israel and Turkey.

Popular support for Israel in Azerbaijan

Israel has generally enjoyed a positive position among the Azerbaijani public. The full integration of Azerbaijan's Jewish community in public life in the country as well as the ties between emigres to Israel and their former neighbours and friends in Azerbaijan, have contributed to this popular attitude in Azerbaijan. Moreover, the strategic cooperation between Azerbaijan and Israel exhibited in the 2020 war has only increased Israel's popularity among Azerbaijanis. During the war and in the public celebrations following the end of the war, numerous public displays of Israeli flags were observed, often together with Turkish, Pakistani and Azerbaijani flags. Positive public sentiments toward Israel were boosted by visits following the war by delegations of Israeli ophthalmological surgeons to treat wounded Azerbaijani soldiers.²⁰ In several procedures, Israeli doctors transplanted eyes from Israeli organ donors and restored sight to several injured Azerbaijani soldiers, generating widespread public appreciation. Azerbaijani soldiers also underwent medical procedures in Israel.

Israel's soft power in Iran

Israel's cooperation with and support of Azerbaijan in the war also generated significant goodwill toward Israel among ethnic Azerbaijanis in Iran. Ethnic Azerbaijanis form approximately a third of the population of multi-ethnic Iran.²¹ Most of Iran's ethnic Azerbaijanis live in provinces that border the Republic of Azerbaijan, including the newly liberated territories. Many went to the border area and witnessed the war in real time, cheering on Azerbaijan's troops. During the war, some Azerbaijanis in Iran held demonstrations against Tehran's support for Armenia, resulting in dozens of arrests. Many of the Azerbaijanis in Iran who identified with their co-ethnics in the Republic of Azerbaijan subsequently formed positive attitudes toward Israel because of its support for the Republic of Azerbaijan during the war. Despite the ruling Iranian regime's fervent anti-Israel policies, many ethnic Azerbaijanis were not afraid to publicly express their positive attitudes toward Israel and gratitude for Israel's support of Azerbaijan in the war and subsequent medical treatment for injured soldiers. For example, dozens of ethnic Azerbaijanis called into the Chicago based Gunaz TV shows in the Azerbaijani language, and expressed their gratitude to Israel for its support for the Republic of Azerbaijan and openly condemned Iran's anti-Israel and pro-Armenia policies.²²

The Israel-Azerbaijan-Turkey triangle

Azerbaijan has long aspired for the return of cooperative relations between two of its closest allies - Turkey and Israel. Following the 2020 war, in which Turkey and Israel both played a critical role in Azerbaijan's success, Baku intensified its push to seek the re-establishment of constructive ties between the two countries. As part of these efforts, in April 2021 President Ilham Aliyev offered to host a summit between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and then-Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.²³ Azerbaijan's successful battlefield integration of Turkish and Israeli UAVs during the war likely entailed direct communication between Turkish and Israeli specialists.

Moreover, Turkey allowed Israel to fly supplies through its airspace to Azerbaijan during the war. Common interests between Turkey, Israel and Azerbaijan are likely to generate calls for increased trilateral cooperation between the three countries. A new attempt to promote the establishment of Israeli natural gas exports to Turkey or via Turkey to Europe (either through direct connection to TANAP or through swaps) is also likely to emerge. Furthermore, Israel is likely to play a role in the post-war economic and infrastructure development of Azerbaijan's liberated territories, providing Israel with opportunities for further cooperation and interaction with regional powers, including Turkey.

Conclusions

Academics and policy makers often describe Azerbaijan's relationship with Israel as being "surprisingly close" in light of Azerbaijan being a Muslim-majority state and even a Shia majority state. However, this is only surprising if the supposition is that strategic alliances are based on common culture or religion. There is no evidence that common culture or religion is a factor in forging alliances.²⁴ In the greater Caucasus region, the opposite is true: Shia Iran is an ally of Christian Armenia,²⁵ despite Armenia's expulsion of close to a million Azerbaijani Shia Muslims from their homes; Russia and Georgia are in conflict, despite sharing an Orthodox Christian faith. Israel and Azerbaijan have built an alliance based on common interests, facing common threats and common approaches to many critical issues. This alliance concerns each state's core national interests and is buttressed by three decades of cooperation following the restoration of Azerbaijan's independence. This cooperation had a significant impact on the outcome of the Second Armenia-Azerbaijan War and is expected to grow in its wake.

Azerbaijan's close ties with Israel have helped pave the way for other Muslim-majority countries to forge open relations with Israel. Azerbaijan and Israel forged diplomatic ties and open cooperation decades before the signing of the Abraham Accords saw relations between Israel and several of its Arab neighbours normalised with strong support

of the United States. Over three decades, the ties between Israel and Azerbaijan demonstrated that a Muslim-majority state can have warm relations with Israel, with no significant public or regional backlash.

An often-repeated misconception related to Israel—Azerbaijan relations is that Iran’s adverse approach to Azerbaijan was formed in response to Baku’s close ties with Israel. This is simply incorrect. As pointed out, Tehran was hostile to Azerbaijan from day one of its independence and consequently supported Armenia in its first war with Azerbaijan in 1992-1994. Azerbaijan and Israel forged close cooperation beginning in 1995/96. It is important to understand the timeline here in order to correctly understand the motivations of Tehran’s policies toward Azerbaijan. Iranian officials were open and explicit in the early 1990s that Tehran’s adversarial policy toward Baku was based on domestic security considerations due to concerns that an independent and prosperous Azerbaijan could be a source of attraction and ethnic awakening of Iran’s own ethnic Azerbaijanis. Mahmoud Va’ezi, who served as Deputy Foreign Minister of Iran responsible for the former Soviet region in the early 1990s stated Iran’s approach the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict clearly: “Iran was in the neighbourhood of the environment of the conflict. Karabakh is situated only 40 km distance from its borders. At that time, this possibility raised that the boundaries of conflict extended to beyond Karabakh. Since then (n), Iran’s consideration was based on security perceptions... Iran could not be indifferent to the developments occurring along its borders, security changes of the borders and their impact on Iran’s internal developments”.²⁶

In the future, Israel and Azerbaijan are likely to increase their cooperation in the field of air defence. During the Second Armenia-Azerbaijan War, several of Armenia’s attacks and attempted attacks illustrated that Azerbaijan could benefit from more extensive air defence systems. During the war, Armenia launched several missile attacks on civilian targets, including against the civilian populations

in the cities of Ganja and Barda. In addition, Armenia launched attacks on energy infrastructure and attempted to “weaponize” infrastructure such as the Mingachevir hydropower dam. Successful attacks on this dam could neutralize Azerbaijan’s main source of electricity and also cause massive destruction across large swaths of territory and extensive loss of life. Aware of the threats from missiles and rockets, Baku is likely to look to expand its air defence capacity. Israel is likely to be the supplier or partner in building improved air defence in Azerbaijan. As demonstrated in recent years, Israel has a proven capacity to provide effective air defence against some of the most complex threats. This increases in importance when it is understood that air launched threats are likely to increase and be a major feature of future wars in the South Caucasus and beyond.

Notes

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