

ISRAEL AND AZERBAIJAN: TO COUNTERACT IRAN

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Introduction

It is well known that Azerbaijan's history does not have any anti-Semitic traditions. And during the time of the Russian and Soviet empires, Azerbaijan was not poisoned by anti-Semitism. Obviously, anti-Semitism has not been an issue in Azerbaijan. Moreover, many famous Jews were born and studied in Azerbaijan. The brilliant scientist of modern physics and Nobel Prize Laureate Lev Landau was born in Baku, Azerbaijan, in 1908 and attended Baku State University in 1922.¹

¹ See: *Lev Davidovich Landau, MacTutor History of Mathematics—University of St Andrews, Scotland*, available at [<http://www-history.mcs.st-andrews.ac.uk/Biographies/>

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the historically close and warm relations between the Jews and Azeris became a solid base for mutual cooperation between the State of Israel and the Republic of Azerbaijan. Both countries have a strategic location but an unfriendly foreign environment, which pushes them to be close and expand cooperation. Azerbaijan and Israel cooperate to counteract or neutralize foreign threats, which is the subject of this paper.

Landau_Lev.html]. Nobelprize.org, available at [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/physics/laureates/1962/landau.html].

Brief Historical Background

Historic sources and research confirm that Jews have lived in Azerbaijan for centuries. They are both Jews of Persian origin (also known as Caucasian Mountain Jews) and Ashkenazi.² The Persian

² See: J. Sloame, "The Virtual Jewish History Tour, Azerbaijan. American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise," *The Jewish Virtual Library*, available at [<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/vjw/Azerbaijan.html>].

Jews can be traced back to Azerbaijan before the 5th century. Their history is more than 2,000 years old, and Azerbaijan has historically always welcomed them. In the 19th century, during the Russian Empire, Ashkenazi began settling in Azerbaijan. And other Ashkenazi Jews came to Azerbaijan during World War II to escape the Nazis.³

In the 19th century, Baku became a center of active Zionism in the Russian Empire. The first branch of Havevei Zion (lovers of Zion) was set up in Baku in 1891. And the first choir synagogue was opened in Baku in 1910.⁴ As early as 1883, oil companies owned by the Rothschild family (of Jewish origin) entered the scene in Baku followed by Rockefeller's gigantic Standard Oil Company.⁵ Thus, the Jews lived in peace and friendship with the local Azeris and engaged in successful business in this country.

In the period of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR, 1918-1920), during which independent Azerbaijan formulated its key ideological, political, and security priorities, the Jewish Popular University was established (1919) and periodicals were published in Yiddish and Hebrew. Moreover, Dr Yevsei Gindes, an Ashkenazi Jew, was Minister of Health in the ADR's Cabinet of Minister under first Prime Minister Fatali Khan Khoyski.⁶

In Soviet times, Jews continued to arrive and settle in Azerbaijan. The Jews in Soviet Azerbaijan were not exposed to the widespread discrimination that was typical in other parts of the U.S.S.R. So, the Ashkenazi Jews formed a significant part of the intellectual and technocratic elites in Soviet Azerbaijan.⁷

Political Dynamics in the Southern Caucasus and Iran's Priorities Toward the Region

The Russo-Georgian War of 2008 significantly shifted South Caucasian policy and created a new political atmosphere in this part of the world. As a result of the war, a completely new strategic situation emerged in the region.⁸

Previously, following Azerbaijan's "Contract of the Century" of 1994, the strategic situation in the Southern Caucasus could be characterized as a period of the West's large-scale penetration. The United States and the European Union, as well as Turkey, started to play a significant role in South Caucasian affairs, which were traditionally orchestrated by Iran and Russia.

³ See: A. Tepper, "The Azeri Exception," *Jewish Ideas Daily*, 29 October, 2010, available at [<http://www.jewishideasdaily.com/content/module/2010/10/29/main-feature/1/the-azeri-exception>].

⁴ See: Elijah, "Azerbaijani Jews," *Bible Discovered*, 25 April, 2009, available at [<http://www.biblediscovered.com/jewish-hebrew-people-in-the-world/azerbaijani-jews/>].

⁵ See: A.L. Altstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks: Power and Identity Under Russian Rule*, Hoover Institution Press 1992, p. 22, available at [http://ebookey.org/The-Azerbaijani-Turks-Power-and-Identity-Under-Russian-Rule_776519.html#3wBsPMWYsEpAcHCu.99].

⁶ See: "Reference for Azerbaijani Jews," Search.com, available at: [http://www.search.com/reference/Azerbaijani_Jews].

⁷ See: A. Murinson, "Jews in Azerbaijan: A History Spanning Three Millennia," *Visions of Azerbaijan*, available at [<http://www.visions.az/history,112/>].

⁸ See: K. Strachota, W. Gorecki, *The Southern Caucasus and Central Asia after the Russian-Georgian War—the Geopolitical Consequences*, Center for Eastern Studies, Poland, 24 September, 2008, available at [http://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/commentary_10.pdf].

Moreover, the Clinton administration launched and the Bush administration continued several strategic programs (Partnership for Peace, the Silk Road Strategy Act, later the Caspian Watch, the EU's Eastern Partnership, and others) oriented toward strengthening the West's presence and minimizing both Iranian and Russian influence in this very sensitive part of the world. Unlike Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia started to drift slowly toward NATO membership. In addition, the South Caucasian countries, particularly Azerbaijan and Georgia, started to develop strong relations with the State of Israel.

Meanwhile, Iran, as a key regional player, reacted very painfully to the West's aggressive "advance" into the Iran's and Russia's traditional sphere of influence. Iran's hostility toward the United States and Israel pushed Tehran to stop or limit Western penetration, as well as Israel's cooperation with Azerbaijan and Georgia. Iran welcomed the Russo-Georgian war of 2008 and considered this war to be a brilliant opportunity to reverse the region's strategic atmosphere from pro-Western to much more pro-Russian, which also meant pro-Iranian.

The Islamic Republic of Iran, as we know, considers Russia to be a key ally in resisting the United States. Tehran prefers to be under Russia's strategic umbrella and cooperates with Moscow on global and regional levels. Tehran supports the strengthening of Russia's influence in the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia for strategic reasons.⁹ In the face of possible American and/or Israeli military options to stop its nuclear program, Iran believes that Russia's dominance in the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia means that neither the U.S. nor NATO will be able to deploy military bases in close proximity to the Iranian border.

Meanwhile, Russia's dominance also needs Iran as a strong co-player to secure both the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia under Moscow's control or jointly with Iran. Therefore, we can identify Tehran's strategic priorities in the Southern Caucasus as follows:

- to counter and reduce U.S. influence;
- to oppose U.S., NATO, and EU initiatives and long-term objectives;
- to prevent the deployment of U.S./NATO troops;
- to stop both Georgia and Azerbaijan from moving toward NATO/EU membership;
- to minimize Israel's influence and cooperation with the South Caucasian countries;
- to arrange the security system in accordance with Iran's strategic interests;
- to control the Caspian energy resources and transportation routes;
- to contain the rising influence of Turkey and the Turkey-Azerbaijani alliance;
- to prolong Turkish-Armenian hostility;
- to oppose strategic cooperation in the Turkey-Georgia-Azerbaijan triangle;
- to ensure Russia's dominance and the current status-quo;
- to support Russia's leading role in the Caspian-Caucasus region.

It is beneficial for Iran to maintain the current status-quo and ensure Russia's dominance in the region. This will enable Iran to reach its paramount strategic goal of limiting or decreasing U.S. influence and preventing America's attempts to redesign the region's political landscape to secure Washington's dominance.

⁹ See: M. Khalifa-zadeh, "Iran and the Southern Caucasus: A Struggle for Influence," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Vol. 12, Issue 1, 2011, available at [<http://www.ca-c.org/journal/2011-01-eng/05.shtml>].

Iran's Attitude and Priorities Toward the Republic of Azerbaijan

In addition to everything else, Iran and Azerbaijan are Shi'ite Muslim countries and have a common historic and cultural heritage, while the Islamic Republic of Iran has a special attitude toward the Republic of Azerbaijan. This attitude originates from the nature of power in Tehran and has a historical and political background. Altogether, these factors determine Iran's policy toward Azerbaijan.

It stands to reason that Iran was one of the first countries to recognize Azerbaijan's return to independence in 1991. Tehran established diplomatic relations with Baku on 22 March, 1992. However, since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the unstable relations between Iran and Azerbaijan demonstrate that the Republic of Azerbaijan's independent and secular status makes Tehran feel uncomfortable or insecure. Tehran is also fuming over Baku's strategic relations with Iran's enemies—the United States and Israel.

The government in Tehran considers the Republic of Azerbaijan to be a direct challenge and threat to its security and political future. This key point in Tehran's calculations toward Azerbaijan possibly originates from the following considerations:

Azerbaijan declared the democratic and secular path of development as early as 1918 at the time of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR).¹⁰ After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan adopted the ADR's political values. And now, the modern Republic of Azerbaijan, unlike the Islamic Republic of Iran, is demonstrating a completely different way of development for a country with a predominantly Shi'ite population.

Next, notwithstanding Russia's and Iran's strong opposition, Baku has been able to establish relations with the United States, the European Union, NATO, and Israel. Moreover, Baku is continuing this strategy despite the direct and angry calls from Tehran to stop cooperation with "Great Satan" (the United States) and "Small Satan" (Israel).¹¹ Tehran's official propaganda declares Israel to be the main enemy of the Islamic world. However, Azerbaijan demonstrates the opposite opinion: Israel is not an enemy, moreover, Israel is a friendly country, and Muslims and Jews can live in peace and friendship.

Additionally, unlike the Shi'a ideology in Iran, nationalism and the Turkish identity are key factors in formulating Azerbaijan's political nature, as well as foreign and security policy. Azerbaijan is developing close ties with Turkey, which is Iran's rival in the Islamic world over Turkey's Kemalist heritage. Both Baku and Ankara cooperate and operate as a strong alliance at the global and regional levels, which makes Iran angry as well.

However, the main factor having a negative impact on Iran's attitude toward Azerbaijan is two "divided" Azerbaijanis. This is the fundamental and most influential factor in Tehran's attitude toward Baku.

Iran is very concerned that Iranian Azeris may establish their own Azerbaijani state, as happened early in 20th century,¹² or join the Republic of Azerbaijan. In this context, the existence of the Repub-

¹⁰ See: "Background Note: Azerbaijan," U.S. Department of State, 23 March 2012, available at [<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2909.htm>].

¹¹ N. O'Malley, "'Great Satan' Backs 'Small Satan': Obama Reaffirms Stance against Iran," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 March, 2012, available at [<http://www.smh.com.au/world/great-satan-backs-small-satan-obama-reaffirms-stance-against-iran-20120306-1uf46.html>].

¹² See: N.L. Nassibli, "Azerbaijan-Iran Relations: Challenges and Prospects," Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Belfer Center for Science and International Development, [http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/12750/azerbaijan_iran_relations.html].

lic of Azerbaijan is a strategic factor for Iran's long-term calculations, as well as for the Azeri national-liberation movement in this country. The mullah's regime in Tehran feels extremely uncomfortable about the possibility of Azerbaijan's secular and successful experience inspiring or igniting the Iranian Azeris to put an end to the mullah's power. Moreover, the nightmare that the West may use Iranian Azeris or other strategic options (divide unpredictable Iran and create a United Azerbaijan as a secular and pro-Western state) against Tehran's regime pushes Iran to be aggressive toward the Republic of Azerbaijan.

Thus, Azerbaijan's independence is a strong exacerbating factor for Iran's policymakers. Therefore, Iran's priorities toward Azerbaijan can be identified as follows:

- to limit and minimize the Republic of Azerbaijan's influence on Iranian Azeris;
- to keep Azerbaijan under permanent pressure and intimidate it by threatening to use military force;
- to extend the ideas of the Iranian Islamic revolution to Azerbaijan;
- to intensify Shi'ite propaganda and expand the Islamic network within the country;
- to destabilize the political situation in Baku and try to establish a pro-Islamic regime;
- to intensify intelligence activity and expand the espionage network;
- to support the separatism of local ethnic groups (Talish, Lezghian, others);
- to stop Israel's cooperation with Azerbaijan and Georgia;
- to minimize America's influence and stop Azerbaijan's bid for EU/NATO membership;
- to damage Azerbaijan's international image;
- to contain Azerbaijan's rise to regional power;
- to provide assistance to Azerbaijan's regional rival—Armenia;
- to maintain the balance between Azerbaijan and Armenia;
- to keep Azerbaijan engaged in the war with Armenia;
- to support Russia's "cosmetic" attempts to solve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict;
- to keep Azerbaijan under Russia's dominance.

Next, as the tension between Iran and the United States and Israel dramatically grows, Iran is increasing the pressure and threatening to use military force against Azerbaijan.¹³ In the face of America's military option to stop the nuclear program, Iran is trying to keep Azerbaijan out of the anti-Iranian alliance. An ideological element must also be identified in Iran's calculations to secure Azerbaijan's neutrality. Tehran's propaganda, as in the Iran-Iraq war, considers Shi'ism to be a powerful ideological factor in consolidating the nation to fight against the enemy. If the Republic of Azerbaijan, as the second Shi'a country in the world, is a member of the anti-Iran alliance, it will significantly decrease the mullah's ideological defense—that only Shi'ism can stop the "crusaders" and the Jews.

¹³ See: "Commander Urges Azerbaijan to Respect Islamic Rules," 10 August, 2011, *ArabsToday* (UK), available at [http://www.arabstoday.net/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=21867:commander-urges-azerbaijan-to-respect-islamic-rules-&catid=43:arab-world].

Azerbaijan's Approach Toward Israel

Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan has been under direct pressure from Russia and Iran. Russia supports Armenia politically, militarily, and economically, which helps Armenia to occupy the Azerbaijani territories of Nagorno-Karabakh.¹⁴ Meanwhile, Iran is also helping Armenia and blames Azerbaijan for its close ties with the United States and Israel.¹⁵

It should be noted that since the restoration of its national independence in 1991, Azerbaijan has been trying to strengthen its independence and liberate the territories occupied by Armenia. Taking into account Russian and Iranian pressure, as well as trying to stabilize and strengthen Azerbaijan's independence, late Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliev oriented the country's strategic policy toward the West and Israel. In 1997, he met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who made a brief stop in Baku. The two men discussed the threats posed by Iran and talked about Israeli-Azerbaijani intelligence cooperation. Some scholars believe that this meeting was a starting point in the cooperation between Azerbaijan and Israel.¹⁶

As a continuation of Heydar Aliev's strategy, on 29 June, 2009, current Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliev welcomed Israeli President Shimon Peres to Baku. President Aliev said: "I am happy to host you in my country. This is a most important visit for Azerbaijan and we are interested in expanding and strengthening the cooperation between Azerbaijan and Israel in the areas of security, diplomacy and the economy."¹⁷

This visit was held despite the strong opposition from Iran aimed at cancelling the Israeli president's visit to Azerbaijan.¹⁸ And, as Israeli experts note, President Aliev's decision gained high respect in Israel. "The clear position of Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliev on relations with Israel, in particular his refusal to submit to the demands of Iran to cancel the visit of Israeli President Shimon Peres to Baku and his refusal to joint any anti-Israel campaigns cause sincere respect in Israel."¹⁹

The cooperation with Israel is vital for Azerbaijan for several strategic reasons.

- First, we agree with the opinion that both Azerbaijan and Israel have a similar or near-identical sense of regional insecurity, which originates from the unfriendly environment.²⁰ Azerbaijan is very concerned that Iran is threatening to use force and is gradually expanding its

¹⁴ See: "Russia Extends Lease on Military Base in Armenia Through 2044," *RIA Novosti*, 20 August, 2010, available at [http://en.rian.ru/military_news/20100820/160276128.html].

¹⁵ See: L. David, "Iran Warns Azerbaijan: Keep Mossad Out," *Arutz Sheva*, 12 February, 2012, available at [<http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/152671>].

¹⁶ See: I. Bourtnan, "Israel and Azerbaijan's Furtive Embrace," *Middle East Quarterly*, Summer 2006, pp. 47-57, available at [<http://www.meforum.org/987/israel-and-azerbaijans-furtive-embrace>].

¹⁷ "Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, President Shimon Peres in Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan for Historic First Visit," 28 June, 2009, available at [http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Government/Communiques/2009/President_Peris_visits_Azerbaijan_and_Kazakhstan_28_Jun_2009.htm].

¹⁸ See: "Iran Recalls Azerbaijan Envoy Following Peres Visit," *JTA* (The Global News Service of the Jewish People), 29 June, 2009, available at [<http://www.jta.org/news/article/2009/06/29/1006211/iran-recalls-azerbaijan-envoy-following-peres-visit>].

¹⁹ "Azerbaijan, Israel have Become 'Strategic Allies', Political analyst Arye Gut comments for News.Az," 28 June, 2011, available at [<http://news.az/articles/politics/39340>].

²⁰ See: "Iran Threatens Pre-emptive Action amid Nuclear Tensions," NBC News and news services updated 21 February, 2012, available at [http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/46461790/ns/world_news-mideast_n_africa/t/iran-threatens-pre-emptive-action-amid-nuclear-tensions/].

intelligence network in Baku and in other cities.²¹ Moreover, Iran is providing Armenia with large-scale assistance.²² Iran's behavior and unfriendly attitude creates huge mistrust that seriously damages Iranian-Azerbaijani relations despite official slogans of friendship and brotherhood between the two countries.²³

- Second, the Israeli-Armenian disagreement over the so-called "genocide," or even Armenia blaming the Jews for the "Armenian genocide,"²⁴ pushes Azerbaijan to cooperate with Israel on this matter. The Azerbaijani political elite relies on Israeli or Jewish support to counter the Armenian diaspora, particularly in the United States and Europe. As early as 1997, during his official working visit to the U.S., President Heydar Aliiev of Azerbaijan met in New York with representatives of American Jewish organizations and asked them to help Azerbaijan.²⁵ Azerbaijan is grateful to Israel for lending the Jewish lobby's weight in Washington to counterbalance the Armenian lobby and improve Azeri-American relations.²⁶

The next reason is that the decades-long successful experience of Turkish-Israeli partnership is inspiring Azerbaijani decision-makers to create strategic ties with Israel. Notwithstanding the temporary problems in Turkish-Israeli relations, Ankara "understands that its regional aspirations require correct relations with the Jewish state."²⁷ Moreover, according to Zvi Elpeleg, former Israeli ambassador to Turkey: "I do not think that relations will deteriorate because there are fundamental reasons why Turkey and Israel have the same interests."²⁸ Meanwhile, Azerbaijan is trying to show that Baku can solve or manage, as an honest broker, the latest Israeli-Turkish disagreements that emerged as a result of the Mavi Marmara incident. Undoubtedly, this kind of mediation can expand Baku's role in Middle Eastern affairs and strengthen Azerbaijan's international capacity.

Moreover, Baku welcomes the triangular security and defense partnership among Turkey, Israel, and Azerbaijan that is flourishing in energy affairs.²⁹ We believe that the triangular partnership scheme could be an effective tool in strengthening and supporting America's diplomacy, as well as in counterbalancing the Iran-Russia axis in the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia.

Undoubtedly, defense cooperation aimed at modernizing the Azerbaijani Army is the next and most important strategic step of high priority for Baku in its relations with Tel-Aviv. In 1992-1994, Israel supported Azerbaijan in the war with Armenia and supplied Stinger missiles and other weapons

²¹ See: Firuzabadi, "Aliiev'i halka baski konusunda uyardi," Tahran, 10 Ađustos, 2011, available at [<http://www.mehrnews.com/tr/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1380193>].

²² See: "Iran Provides Every Support to Armenia—Azerbaijani MP," 14 February, 2012, available at [<http://www.news.az/articles/politics/54665>].

²³ See: J. Manuelian, "Jews, Zionists behind Armenian Genocide," 23 April, 2004, available at [<http://secretjews.wordpress.com/006/>].

²⁴ "Israel 'Not to Recognize' Armenian Version of 1915 Massacres. News.Az Interviews Israeli Journalist and Political Activist Avigdor Eskin," 20 June, 2011, available at [<http://www.news.az/articles/politics/38758>].

²⁵ See: *Speech of Azerbaijan President Heydar Aliiev on the Official Reception in Honor of President Heydar Aliiev on Behalf of the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations*, 28 July, 1997, Heydar Aliiev Heritage International Online Library, available at [<http://library.Aliev-heritage.org/en/7423863.html>].

²⁶ See: I. Bourtman, op. cit.

²⁷ E. Inbar, "Israeli Turkish Tensions and Beyond," *Hurriyet Daily News*, 12 March, 2010, available at [<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=israeli-turkish-tensions-and-beyond-2010-03-12>].

²⁸ S. Demirtaş, "Amid Sound and Fury, Turkey-Israel Alliance Endures," *Hurriyet Daily News*, 13 April, 2012, available at [<http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/english/domestic/10705597.asp>].

²⁹ See: A. Murinson, "Azerbaijan-Turkey-Israel Relations: The Energy Factor," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 12, No. 3, September 2008, available at [http://www.worldsecuritynetwork.com/documents/2008sep_murinson4.pdf].

to Azerbaijani troops.³⁰ Moreover, the Jews of Azerbaijan fought together with the Azeris against the Armenians. Mountain Jew Albert Agarunov, an Azerbaijani Army officer, became a National Hero of Azerbaijan.³¹ So the latest news related to bilateral defense cooperation is that Azerbaijan has signed a deal to buy arms worth \$1.5 billion from Israel.³²

Finally, Azerbaijan considers relations with Israel to be part of a long-term strategy to draw closer to the United States and so contain the strong Iranian and Russian pressure. At present, Israeli-Azerbaijani cooperation covers foreign policy, military, economy, and intelligence. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan has a Diplomatic Mission in Tel Aviv because Baku does not want to jeopardize its relations with the Muslim countries. Moreover, neither side wants to publicize its relations. Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev described his country's relationship with the Jewish state as an iceberg: "nine-tenth of it is below the surface."³³

Israel's Priorities Toward Azerbaijan

Dr Ariel Cohen of the Washington, D.C.-based Heritage Foundation argues: "Israel's strategic priorities include developing good diplomatic and economic relations with Caucasus and Central Asia countries, preventing Iran from increasing its influence in the region, and participating in energy projects, including oil and gas imports to Israel."³⁴

On 23-24 April, 2012, Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman came to Baku on a two-day official visit. He met with President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan. The two men discussed bilateral relations and Iran. According to Israeli analysts: "Lieberman's visit comes one month after the American magazine *Foreign Policy* reported that Azerbaijan has given Israel access to Azerbaijani airbases, which is considered an important step toward a possible attack on Iran."³⁵ Both Azerbaijan and Israel rejected the allegations and Lieberman's comments in Baku on this matter: "Such reports are from the sphere of science fiction and do not correspond with the truth."³⁶

Undoubtedly, Lieberman's visit once again confirms the strategic character of Israeli-Azerbaijani ties. According to the Israeli news media: "The foreign minister acknowledged that Israel and

³⁰ See: S. Cagaptay, A. Murinson, "Good Relations between Azerbaijan and Israel: A Model for Other Muslim States in Eurasia?" The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 30 March, 2005, available at [<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/good-relations-between-azerbaijan-and-israel-a-model-for-other-muslim-state>].

³¹ See: "Address of Jewish Diaspora of Azerbaijan, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe," OSCE, 19 June, 2003, available at [<http://www.osce.org/secretariat/42078>].

³² See: "Azerbaijan Rejects Iran Fears over Israel 'Arms Buy,'" *Defense News*, 29 February, 2012, available at [<http://www.defensenews.com/article/20120229/DEFREG04/302290002/Azerbaijan-Rejects-Iran-Fears-Over-Israel-8216-Arms-Buy-8217->].

³³ P. Brennan, "Israeli-Azerbaijan Deal Leaked, Bolton Blames Obama," 29 March, 2012, available at [<http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/294856/bolton-blames-obama-leaking-israeli-azerbaijan-relationship-patrick-brennan>].

³⁴ A. Cohen, K. DeCorla-Souza, "Eurasian Energy and Israel's Choices," The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies Bar-Ilan University, *Mideast Security and Policy Studies*, No. 88, February 2011, available at [<http://www.biu.ac.il/SOC/besa/MSPS88.pdf>].

³⁵ "Lieberman Denies Israel has Access to Azerbaijan Air Bases," *JewishJournal.com*, 23 April, 2012, available at [http://www.jewishjournal.com/israel/article/lieberman_denies_israel_has_access_to_azerbaijan_air_bases_20120423/].

³⁶ "Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman Visits North Azerbaijan on 20th Anniversary of Diplomatic Relations," *BayBak*, Azerbaijan, 24 April, 2012, available at [<http://en.baybak.com/israeli-foreign-minister-avigdor-lieberman-visits-north-azerbaijan-on-20th-anniversary-of-diplomatic-relations.azr>].

Azerbaijan—which is strategically located on Iran’s northern border—have good, stable relations, and he described it as an ‘important country which is now a member of the U.N. Security Council.’”³⁷

It is well known that Israeli policymakers consider Azerbaijan and the Caspian littoral to be part of the Greater Middle East.³⁸ And Israel, as a country with decades-long hostility toward the Arab states, is trying to enhance its security, as well as foreign image and international relations. Israel launched a strategy to develop relations with the non-Arab Muslim states. And as some scholars note: “Expanding its influence into an area of the world heavily Muslim but not Arab has long been a strategic Israeli objective.”³⁹

Indeed, the strategy is designed to improve relations with the Islamic world, as well as to demonstrate that Israel can have peaceful relations with Muslim states. Israel is trying to prove that there is no Israel-Muslim or Jews-Muslim confrontation. The collapse of the U.S.S.R. provided a brilliant opportunity for developing relations with the newly independent former Soviet Muslim republics. And now Israel has diplomatic relations with nine non-Arab Muslim states.⁴⁰

Azerbaijan’s experience of peaceful coexistence between Azeris and Jews is attractive to the Israeli political elite. It also creates a favorable background for developing long-term partnership. And Israeli policymakers are reacting enthusiastically and positively to Azerbaijan’s attempts to establish close bilateral relations.

However, the Islamic Republic of Iran forms the backbone of Israel’s relations toward Azerbaijan. Iran presents the most serious threat to Israel. And Israel launched a strategy of active diplomacy in the regions surrounding Iran. In May 2009, during the conference at the Center for Iranian Studies at Tel Aviv University, former Chief of Israeli Defense Intelligence Major General Aharon Zeevi Farkash said: “It is very important to form a coalition with the moderate Sunnite countries which are also aware of the Iranian nuclear threat.” Moreover, according to Israeli analyst Uzi Rabbi, Israel must conduct active diplomacy in the regions surrounding Iran and “...to resist Iranian aggression several coalition alliances should be formed.”⁴¹

Thus, due to its strategic location along Iran’s northern border, Azerbaijan is a top priority in Israel’s foreign policy toward the CIS. Israeli policymakers take into account that Azerbaijan feels insecurity and distrust toward Iran because of Tehran’s large-scale assistance to Armenia, which occupies Azerbaijani territory.

In this context, it should be noted that Israel has repeatedly declared that Tel Aviv supports Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity. Ex-Ambassador of Israel to Turkey and ex-Deputy Foreign Minister Pinkhaz Avivi said: “Our position is the following: we recognize the principle of Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity... We don’t try to hide the fact that our relations with Azerbaijan are more intense and rewarding than our relations with Armenia and that relations with Azerbaijan are strategically important for us.” He also added in an interview: “We have common goals. We understand Azerbaijan’s concern with its Iranian neighbor better than anyone, and that’s a good ground for rapprochement. Our dialog with Armenia, on the other hand, has always been interconnected with our relations with Turkey.”⁴²

³⁷ H. Keinon, “Reports Baku Gave Israel Airfields are Fiction,” *The Jerusalem Post*, 4 April, 2012, available at [<http://www.jpost.com/DiplomacyAndPolitics/Article.aspx?id=267268>].

³⁸ See: A. Bülent, “Post-Cold War Realities: Israel’s Strategy in Azerbaijan and Central Asia,” *Middle East Policy*, January 1998, pp. 68-69, available at [<http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-20297513.html>].

³⁹ I. Bourttman, op. cit.

⁴⁰ See: “Israel, Background Notes,” U.S. Department of State, available at [www.state.gov].

⁴¹ A. Grigoryan, “Priority Directions in the Foreign Policy of Israel: Southern Caucasus and Central Asia,” Noravank Foundation, 22 September, 2009, available at [http://www.noravank.am/eng/articles/detail.php?ELEMENT_ID=3623].

⁴² Pinkaz Avivi: “We Embrace the Potential of Economic Ties with the South Caucasus,” *Vestnik Kavkaza*, 7 November, 2011, available at [<http://vestnikkavkaza.net/interviews/politics/19641.html>].

The Turkish factor is undoubtedly essential for Israel's foreign and security policy. And Israel considers the Turkish-Azerbaijani alliance to be a favorable factor in deepening and enhancing security and defense cooperation with Azerbaijan despite some cooling of Israel's relations with Ankara. Israel considers the expansion of political and defense cooperation with Azerbaijan to be a determining factor in improving its relations with Turkey. Thus, the Israeli military industry is now a major provider of advanced aviation, anti-tank artillery, and anti-infantry weapon systems to Azerbaijan. Moreover, Aeronautics Defense Systems of Israel is helping Azerbaijan to assemble unmanned aircrafts.⁴³ The latest news is that Israeli defense officials have reportedly confirmed a deal to sell Azerbaijan unmanned military aircraft, antiaircraft, and missile defense systems for some \$1.6 billion.⁴⁴

Meanwhile, Israel and Azerbaijan are intensively cooperating in security issues. In October 2001, President Heydar Aliiev of Azerbaijan met with Israel's ambassador Eitan Naeh and confirmed that "their positions in the fight against international terrorism ... were identical." And according to Israeli experts, groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir threaten both Tel Aviv and Baku. Israeli analysts also argue that some Wahhabi organizations may have found refuge in Azerbaijan.⁴⁵ Indeed, cooperation in security covers information exchange, data analysis (including satellite information), briefings, and other activities. Israel trains Azerbaijani security and intelligence service officers and also provides security for Azeri President on foreign visits. Some sources report that Israel set up electronic listening stations along the Caspian Sea and Iranian border.⁴⁶

Israel's next priority is to counter Iran's intelligence network in Azerbaijan and in other Muslim countries of the CIS. Iran is trying to increase its political influence on its immediate neighbors, as well as intensify intelligence operations, particularly in Azerbaijan. The Azerbaijani media report that national security services have arrested 22 people who were hired by Iran to carry out terrorist attacks against the U.S. and Israeli embassies, as well as Western-linked groups and companies in Baku. In February 2012, the Azerbaijani Ministry of National Security announced the arrest of a terrorist group allegedly working for Iran's secret services. And in January 2012, the Azerbaijani secret service arrested two people accused of plotting to kill two teachers at a Jewish school in Baku. In 2007, Azerbaijan arrested 15 people in connection with an alleged Iranian-linked spy network accused of passing on intelligence regarding Western and Israeli activities.⁴⁷

Obviously, Azeri-Israeli security cooperation is vital and beneficial for Baku and Tel Aviv. The failure of Azeri-Israeli joint efforts to counter Iran would be daunting. Moreover, it would have unpredictable consequences for Baku and Tel Aviv. Tehran's attempts to expand Shi'ite and Iranian ideology may have a catastrophic impact on Azerbaijan's striving to be an independent and strong ally of the U.S. in this part of the world. The loss of secular Azerbaijan would undoubtedly deal a severe blow to Israel's security and America's strategic interests in the Greater Middle East and particularly in the Southern Caucasus and Caspian Basin.

Lastly, Azerbaijani energy is a critical factor in Israel's strategic calculations. In 2011, Azerbaijan exported up to 2.5 million tons (about 18.5 million barrels) of oil to Israel totaling \$2.1 billion. In

⁴³ See: "Azeris Get Israel UAVs Built under License," *UPI*, 7 October, 2011, available at [http://www.spacewar.com/reports/Azeris_get_Israel_UAVs_built_under_license_999.html].

⁴⁴ See: "Israel Signs \$1.6 Billion Arms Deal with Azerbaijan," *Haaretz.com*, 26 February, 2012, available at [<http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/israel-signs-1-6-billion-arms-deal-with-azerbaijan-1.414916>].

⁴⁵ See: I. Bourtnan, op. cit.

⁴⁶ See: Sh. Abilov, "The Azerbaijan-Israel Relations: A Non-diplomatic but Strategic Partnership," *Uluslararası Stratejik Araştırmalar Kurumu*, Turkey, available at [www.usak.org.tr], *OAKA*, Cilt 4, Sayı 8, 2009, S. 138-156, available at [<http://www.usak.org.tr/dosyalar/dergi/gm3veLfV7Q5rP83jaIV34UObvarinb.pdf>].

⁴⁷ See: "Azerbaijan Arrests Alleged Iran-hired Terrorists," *Fox News*, 14 March, 2012, available at [<http://www.foxnews.com/world/2012/03/14/22-arrested-in-azerbaijan-in-plot-on-us-israeli-embassies/>].

the same year, the trade turnover between Israel and Azerbaijan reached \$4 billion.⁴⁸ So Azerbaijan is Israel's top trade partner within the CIS countries.

According to Dr Ariel Cohen, Israel: "...can benefit from projects designed to bring Caspian and Central Asian oil and gas to Western markets as they allow Israel to diversify supply and receive abundant energy at affordable price."⁴⁹

Undoubtedly, Israeli-Azerbaijani energy cooperation is of vital importance for Israel's energy security. This cooperation allows diversification of oil and gas deliveries and exploration of Israel's energy resources. Baku provides Israel with over one-third of Israel's oil demand.⁵⁰ And, as result of Israeli Foreign Minister Lieberman last visit to Baku, SOCAR will start drilling at Med Ashdod, Israel's oil field located 16 km off the Mediterranean coast. Israeli Ambassador to Baku Michael Lotem said: "The drilling will begin soon. The work is at a very advanced stage and delivery of a drilling rig to the field is now expected."⁵¹ Meantime, the project is SOCAR's first oil-production or drilling operation outside of Azerbaijan. The contract allows SOCAR to gain international experience and expand operations to Turkey, Georgia, Israel, and other countries.

Implications for the United States

It is well known that the United States has declared the Caspian Basin a zone of its vital national interests.⁵² In this context, we believe that Israeli-Azerbaijani partnership is an effective tool for strengthening and supporting America's strategic presence in this very sensitive part of the world. Additionally, the Israeli-Azerbaijani alliance counters Iran, which is of strategic importance for U.S. national interests, particularly in the Greater Middle East and Central Asia.

Unlike Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia are America's allies in the Southern Caucasus and Caspian Basin. And the strengthening of Azerbaijan's secular and pro-Western independence should be a strategic priority for U.S. diplomacy in the region.

However, the Obama administration's lack of focus on South Caucasian affairs jeopardizes America's strategic interests in the region. Unlike the Clinton administration and the Bush administration, the Obama administration is not active in containing Iran and Russia in this part of the world. Therefore, as result of the Russo-Georgian war of 2008, the Tehran-Moscow axis effectively decreased America's influence in the Greater Caspian Basin. Now the axis continues to limit and minimize U.S. political activity and puts pressure on Washington's allies.

Indeed, Azerbaijan is under double pressure from Iran and Russia and needs strong America's support to secure its national independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. Azerbaijan's pro-Western independence ensures the U.S.'s strategic presence in the Caspian basin and also facilitates

⁴⁸ See: "Lieberman: 'The Trade Turnover between Azerbaijan and Israel Reaches \$4 Billion,'" Contact.az, 23 April, 2012, available at [<http://www.contact.az/docs/2012/Politics/04234650en.htm>].

⁴⁹ A. Cohen, K. DeCorla-Souza, op. cit.

⁵⁰ See: J. Alic, "Azerbaijan's International Energy Aspirations Raise Tensions in Middle East," OILPROCE.com, 15 May, 2012, available at [<http://oilprice.com/Geopolitics/Middle-East/Azerbaijans-International-Energy-Aspirations-Raise-Tensions-in-Middle-East.html>].

⁵¹ Sh. Abbasov, "Azerbaijan: SOCAR to Use Israeli Oil Field as Proving Ground," Erasianet.org, 8 May, 2012, available at [<http://www.erasianet.org/node/65374>].

⁵² See: M. Laruelle, S. Peyrouse, "The Militarization of the Caspian Sea: 'Great Games' and 'Small Games' Over the Caspian Fleets," *The China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2009, pp. 17-35.

U.S. power projection deep into Asia. In this context, Azerbaijan is of high geostrategic importance for the United States. Therefore, the loss of a secular and independent Azerbaijan will badly damage U.S. global policy and particularly U.S. oil diplomacy in the Caspian Basin. Thus, we presume that the United States will be very supportive of Israeli-Azerbaijani cooperation designed to counter threats and strengthen their security as reliable U.S. allies.

Conclusion

Despite strong opposition from Tehran and Russia, Azerbaijan has established close relations with the West and Israel. At present, Baku and Tel Aviv are partners in a wide range of issues. Insecurity and regional threats are pushing both Azerbaijan and Israel to create a strategic alliance that enhances their security and defense capabilities.

However, the future of Israeli-Azerbaijani cooperation depends on the political nature of the ruling power in Azerbaijan. Iran is trying to spread the ideas of the Islamic Revolution to Azerbaijan. Iran is also tightening Shi'ite propaganda and expanding its intelligence network in Baku and other major cities.

The strengthening of pro-Islamic or Shi'a political forces will undoubtedly have a catastrophic impact on Azerbaijan's political future as a secular state and strong Israeli and U.S. ally. Azerbaijan's secular independence and its pro-Western foreign policy are extremely important for American and Israeli interests in the Greater Middle East and post-Soviet space.

Therefore, Azerbaijan's future should be a strategic priority for Israel and the United States. We believe that the new U.S. administration will intensify its efforts to support Azerbaijan's independence and territorial integrity, which will extend NATO's security umbrella to cover strategic Western oil infrastructure.

Finally, Azerbaijan is trying to stay neutral in any military option to stop Iran's nuclear program. On 29 May, 2012, during his visit to Tehran, Azerbaijani Minister of Defense said: "The Republic of Azerbaijan, like always in the past, will never permit any country to take advantage of its land, or air, against the Islamic Republic of Iran, which we consider our brother and a friendly country."⁵³

Indeed, Baku would like to avoid any possible military clashes with Iran and maintain its neutrality. However, Azerbaijan's behavior and pragmatic foreign policy indicate that Baku's neutrality is more pro-Western than pro-Iranian. Therefore, Azerbaijan will continue to cooperate with Israel, which corresponds to Azerbaijan's national interests.

⁵³ "President Reiterates Iran's Support for Azerbaijan's Territorial Integrity," Fars News Agency (FNA), 29 May, 2012, available at [<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9012152197>].