

# MERIA

## ISRAELI-AZERBAIJANI ALLIANCE AND IRAN

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*This article discusses cooperation between Israel and the Republic of Azerbaijan in order to neutralize foreign threats and ensure regional security. Expanding and improving ties with Azerbaijan has been part of Israel's newly adopted strategy toward non-Arab Muslim states. Also addressed is Iran's attitude towards Azerbaijan and the political and ideological opposition between the two mainly Shi'a-populated countries. Highlighted is the cooperation's strategic importance for improving security and defense capabilities for both Israel and Azerbaijan. Last, U.S. priorities in the South Caucasus are viewed in the context of the Israeli-Azerbaijani alliance.*

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Historic sources and research confirm that Jews of both Persian (also known as Caucasian Mountain Jews) as well as Ashkenazi origin have lived in Azerbaijan for centuries.<sup>1</sup> The presence of Persian Jews in Azerbaijan can be traced back over 2,000 years, to even before the fifth century. Historically, Azerbaijan has been very welcoming toward the Jews. During the periods of both the Russian and Soviet empires Azerbaijan had no antisemitic traditions. In the nineteenth century, under the Russian Empire, Jews of Ashkenazi descent began to settle in Azerbaijan. Others arrived during World War II to escape the Nazis.<sup>2</sup> Many famous Jews were born and have studied in Azerbaijan, including scientist of modern physics and Nobel Prize Laureate Lev Landau. Born in Baku, Azerbaijan, in 1908, he enrolled in Baku State University in 1922.<sup>3</sup>

During the nineteenth century, Baku became a center for the Zionist movement in the Russian Empire. The first branch of Hovevei Zion ("Lovers of Zion") was established in Baku in 1891, and in 1910, the first choir synagogue opened in the city.<sup>4</sup>

Even earlier, in 1883, oil companies owned by the Rothschild family (of Jewish origin) entered the scene in Baku, followed by Rockefeller's gigantic Standard Oil Company.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the Jews lived in peace and friendship with local Azeris and had successful businesses in the country.

During the period of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR, 1918-1920)--which formulated key ideological, political, and security priorities for independent Azerbaijan--the Jewish Popular University was established (1919) and Yiddish- and Hebrew-language periodicals were published. Moreover, Dr. Yevsey Gindes, an Ashkenazi Jew, served as Minister of Health in ADR's cabinet under the first prime minister, Fatali Khan Khoyski.

Jews continued to arrive and settle in Azerbaijan during the Soviet period as well. The Jews in Soviet Azerbaijan were not exposed to the widespread discrimination that was typical in other parts of the USSR. Thus, the Ashkenazi Jews formed a significant part of the intellectual and technocratic elites in Soviet Azerbaijan.<sup>6</sup>

## **POLITICAL DYNAMICS IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS AND IRAN'S PRIORITIES IN THE REGION**

The Russo-Georgian War of 2008 shifted South Caucasus politics significantly and created a new political atmosphere in this part of the world. As a result of the war, a completely new strategic situation has emerged in the region.<sup>7</sup> Prior to the war, since 1994, when Azerbaijan signed the "Contract of the Century" (agreement with a consortium of international oil companies for the exploration and exploitation of three offshore oil fields in the country), the strategic situation in the South Caucasus could be characterized as a period of large-scale Western penetration. The United States, the European Union, and Turkey, began to play a significant role in South Caucasian affairs, which had traditionally been orchestrated by Iran and Russia.

Moreover, several strategic programs were launched by the Clinton administration (and continued under the Bush administration) and the EU. These included Partnership for Peace, the Silk Road Strategy Act, Caspian Watch, the EU's Eastern Partnership, and others. The goal of these programs was to strengthen the Western presence and minimize both Iranian and Russian influence in this very sensitive part of the world. Unlike Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia slowly began to drift toward NATO membership. In addition, South Caucasian countries, particularly Azerbaijan and Georgia, started to develop strong ties with the State of Israel.

In the meantime, Iran, as a key regional player, reacted very concerned about the West's "aggressive advance" into the traditionally Iranian and Russian 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, which it saw as a brilliant opportunity to reverse the region's strategic atmosphere from pro-Western to a much more pro-Russian atmosphere --hence a more pro-Iranian one also.

The Islamic Republic of Iran 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 South Caucasus and Central Asia for strategic reasons.<sup>8</sup> In face of possible U.S. and/or Israeli military options to stop the Iranian nuclear program, Iran hopes Russia's dominance in the South Caucasus and Central Asia would prevent the United States or NATO from deploying military bases in close proximity to the Iranian border.

At the same time, Russia also needs Iran's cooperation in order to secure both the South Caucasus and Central Asia under Moscow, or under shared Iranian control. Tehran's strategic priorities in the South Caucasus can thus be identified as follows:

1. To counter and reduce U.S. influence;
2. To oppose U.S., NATO, and EU initiatives and long-term objectives;
3. To prevent the deployment of U.S./NATO troops;
4. To block both Georgia and Azerbaijan from moving toward NATO/EU membership;
5. To minimize Israel's influence and cooperation with South Caucasian countries;
6. To align the security order with Iran's strategic interests;
7. To control Caspian energy resources and transportation routes;

8. To contain the rising influence of Turkey and the Turkey-Azerbaijani alliance;
9. To prolong the Turkish-Armenian hostility;
10. To oppose the Turkey-Georgia-Azerbaijan triangle of strategic cooperation;
11. To ensure Russia's dominance and the current status-quo; and
12. To support Russia's leading role in the Caspian-Caucasus region.

Last, it is beneficial for Iran to maintain the current status-quo and to support Russia's dominance in the region. In this case, Iran is able to ensure its paramount strategic goal: to limit or decrease U.S. influence and prevent American attempts to redesign the region's political landscape in order to secure Washington's dominance.

#### **IRAN'S ATTITUDE TOWARD THE REPUBLIC OF AZERBAIJAN**

Notwithstanding, Iran and Azerbaijan are both Shi'i Muslim countries and have a common historical and cultural heritage. History as well as ideological and political factors have shaped relations between the two countries and have influenced the policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran toward the Republic of Azerbaijan. Iran was among the first countries to recognize Azerbaijan's return to independence in 1991, establishing diplomatic relations with Baku in March 22, 1992. Since the Soviet disintegration, however, the unstable and complicated Iranian-Azerbaijani relationship has demonstrated Tehran's discomfort with Azerbaijan's existence as an independent and secular state. In addition, Tehran resents Baku's strategic relations with Iran's key enemies--the United States and Israel. It is clear from the actions of the Iranian government that it considers Azerbaijan a

direct challenge or threat to its security and political future. This key point in Tehran's calculations towards Azerbaijan has deep historical roots.

#### ***Historical Factors***

From ancient times, the Azeri Turks and Azerbaijan were both heart and part of the Persian Empire. Azeri Turk dynasties like the Ghaznavids, Safavids, Qajars, and others played a key role in expanding and defending the Persian Empire, and the Azerbaijani city of Tabriz served as capital of the Empire for centuries. Several Iranian shahs, in fact, are of Azeri Turk origin.<sup>9</sup>

It was only in the nineteenth century with the 1828 Treaty of Turkmenchay that Imperial Russia gained control of part of the Persian Empire, the then semi-independent northern Azerbaijani khanates. These territories became the nucleus for the modern republics of Azerbaijan and Armenia. The Persian Empire officially renounced its claim to the northern Azerbaijani khanates, leading to the division of Azerbaijan into two: Northern Azerbaijan or Russian (Soviet) Azerbaijan and Southern Azerbaijan or Iranian Azerbaijan. Since the Soviet Union's collapse, this history has created an illusion among Iranians that Tehran's government has the right to take Azerbaijan back under its control, to intervene in Azerbaijani politics, and to manipulate Azerbaijan's future in accordance with Iran's interests. Baku's assertion of independence and its clear unwillingness to be reincorporated into Iran has made for a rocky relationship with Teheran.

#### ***Political Factors***

On May 28, 1918, following the collapse of the Russian Empire, Azerbaijan declared its independence and identified itself as the

Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR, 1918-1920).<sup>10</sup> Iran attempted to reincorporate Azerbaijan, but the ADR government refused and established relations with the Entente governments in order to secure its independence. The Azerbaijan Democratic Republic adapted a secular and political system based on the principles of Western-style democracy and established a multi-party parliament. ADR was thus the first Western-style state in the Muslim world. It declared equal rights to all citizens, including ethnic minorities, men, and women, and granted Azerbaijani women the right to vote.

Today's Republic of Azerbaijan is a successor of ADR and shares its political and ideological values. It is a secular and pro-Western nation in the South Caucasus. The country's political development has very much differed from that of the Islamic Republic of Iran, though they both have predominantly Shi'i populations. In the eyes of the government and the mullahs in Tehran, this is unacceptable.

### ***Ideological Factors***

Azerbaijan's secular and Western-style statehood is based on an ideology that totally contradicts that of Iran. Tehran's mullah government considers Shi'ism a unique ideology and a powerful force to unite the nation. The Iranian government has thus strengthened Shi'i ideology and suppressed the identities of the ethnic minorities in the country, including Azeri Turks (Iranian Azeris). It has also attempted to eliminate independent Azerbaijan's ideological and political impact. Interestingly, Iran's Azeri Turk Safavid dynasty officially converted Iran from Sunni to Shi'i at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Shah Ismail Safavid, an Azeri Turk and founder of the Safavid dynasty, is an

important historical figure both in Iran and in Azerbaijan.<sup>11</sup>

While Iran follows the Shi'i ideology, Azerbaijan has adopted a Kemalist ideology. Azerbaijani nationalism is based on the ADR's ideological and political values as well as on Azeri Turk or Turkish identity. Thus, despite its common historical heritage with Iran, the Republic of Azerbaijan had close ties with Kemalist Turkey and shared the late Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev's "one nation, two states" ideology and strategy with the Turkish Republic.<sup>12</sup>

Even after the coming to power of an Islamist-oriented, post-Kemalist government in Turkey, this relationship continues and it supports Azerbaijan's sense of identity. On the other hand, the Azerbaijani government considers nationalism and Kemalist ideology as well as the "one nation, two states" strategy as powerful tools to contain Iran's attempts to strengthen Shi'i ideology in Azerbaijan, which has created a major ideological gap and opposition between the two countries.

Last, Tehran's hostility toward Azerbaijan is deeply rooted in the history. The fundamental and most influential factor in Tehran's relations with Baku is that of two "divided" Azerbaijanians. Iran fears Iranian Azeris may establish their own Azerbaijani state--as occurred in the early twentieth century<sup>13</sup>--or will become part of the Republic of Azerbaijan. The mullah regime in Tehran is greatly concerned that Azerbaijan's success as a secular state could inspire or ignite Iranian Azeris to bring about the downfall of the current regime in Iran. These fears are exacerbated by the possibility of the West using Iranian Azeris against Tehran. The Azerbaijani republic is thus a major factor in Iran's long-term strategy and the Azeri national liberation movement in Iran has become an element of global politics. In this context, Iran has thus

adopted an aggressive stance toward the neighboring republic.<sup>14</sup>

### **IRANIAN PRIORITIES VIS-À-VIS AZERBAIJAN**

Tensions between Baku and Tehran are manifest in more than one area, though in particular in foreign policy and security issues. To counteract the strong Russian and Iranian opposition, Azerbaijan has maintained strategic relations with the United States, the European Union, NATO, and Israel. Moreover, Baku continues to espouse a pro-Western strategy, despite direct calls from Tehran to end its cooperation with the "Great Satan" (United States) and "Small Satan" (Israel).<sup>15</sup>

Tehran's official propaganda declares Israel as a main enemy of the Islamic world. Azerbaijani policy, however, differs. It does not view Israel as an enemy and considers it a friendly country, in which Muslims and Jews can live in peace and friendship. At the same time, Azerbaijan has developed close ties with Turkey, Iran's rival in the Islamic world. Baku and Ankara cooperate and operate as a strong alliance on the global and regional levels, which has angered Iran. Thus, Azerbaijan's independence and its secular and democratic nature of power as well as its pro-Western government are strong exacerbating factors for Iran's policymakers. In light of this, Iran's key priorities towards Azerbaijan can be identified as follows:

1. To spread the Iranian Islamic Revolution's ideas to Azerbaijan;
2. To intensify Shi'i ideology propaganda and expand the Islamic network;
3. To destabilize the political situation in Azerbaijan in an attempt to establish a pro-Islamic or Shi'i regime;

4. To damage or discredit Azerbaijan's independence, as well as its secular and democratic nature;
5. To intensify intelligence activity and expand its espionage network;
6. To limit and minimize Azerbaijan's influence on Iranian Azeris;
7. To support the separatism of local ethnic groups (Talish, Lesgi, and others);
8. To halt Israel's cooperation with Azerbaijan and Georgia;
9. To minimize U.S. influence and curtail Azerbaijan's bid for EU/NATO membership;
10. To damage Azerbaijan's international image and pro-Western foreign policy;
11. To contain Azerbaijan's rise to regional power;
12. To exert constant pressure on and intimidate Azerbaijan to use military force;
13. To provide assistance to Azerbaijan's regional rival--Armenia--to maintain the balance between the two countries, and to keep Azerbaijan engaged in war with Armenia;
14. To support Russia's "cosmetic" attempts to solve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict;
15. To preserve Azerbaijan under Russia's dominance.

Last, as tensions between Iran and both the United States and Israel has grown, Iran has increased pressure and threats to use military force against Azerbaijan.<sup>16</sup> In face of America's military option to stop the Iranian nuclear program, Iran has attempted to keep Azerbaijan outside of the anti-Iranian alliance. There is also an ideological

dimension to Iran's desire to secure Azerbaijan's neutrality. As the second largest Shi'i country in the world, if Azerbaijan were to become a member of an anti-Iran alliance, this would significantly decrease the mullah's ideological defense that only the Shi'a can fight against enemies and stop "crusaders" and Jews.

### **AZERBAIJAN'S APPROACH TOWARD ISRAEL**

Since the Soviet Union's disintegration, Azerbaijan has been under direct pressure from Russia and Iran. Russia supports Armenia politically, militarily, and economically, which helps Armenia to occupy Nagorno-Karabakh--which is internationally recognized as Azerbaijani land.<sup>17</sup> Iran has also provided support to Armenia and blames Azerbaijan for its close links with the United States and Israel.

Since the time of its restored national independence in 1991, Azerbaijan has strived to become an important regional player and to retake lands occupied by Armenia. In line with these goals and as a result of Russian and Iranian pressure, the late Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev oriented the country's strategic foreign 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 discussed the Iranian threat as well as Israeli-Azerbaijani intelligence cooperation. The meeting was considered by some to be the starting point for the alliance between the two countries.<sup>18</sup>

As a continuation of Heydar Aliyev's strategy, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev welcomed Israeli President Shimon Peres in Baku on in June 2009. President Ilham Aliyev 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."<sup>19</sup>

Peres's visit took place despite strong opposition from Iran.<sup>20</sup> President Aliyev's decision earned him great respect in Israel. "The clear position of Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev 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 join any anti-Israel campaigns" have garnered "sincere respect in Israel."<sup>21</sup>

Cooperation with Israel is vital for Azerbaijan for several strategic reasons. First, both Azerbaijan and Israel face regional security threats.<sup>22</sup> Despite official slogans of friendship and brotherhood between two nations,<sup>23</sup> Azerbaijan very much fears Iranian threatens to use force and expand its intelligence network in Baku and in other parts of the country.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, Iran provides large-scale support to Armenia, which seriously damages Azerbaijani-Iranian relations and creates serious mistrust between the two countries.<sup>25</sup> Azerbaijani political elites consider Israeli or Jewish support a key element in countering the Armenian diaspora, particularly in the United States and Europe. In 1997, during an official visit to the United States, President Heydar Aliyev met with representatives of American Jewish organizations in New York and openly asked them to help Azerbaijan.<sup>26</sup> Azerbaijan is grateful to Israel for lending the pro-Israel lobby's weight in Washington to improve Azeri-American relations.<sup>27</sup>

Another strategic factor was the successful experience of the Turkish-Israeli partnership for over a decade, which inspired Azerbaijani decisionmakers to form strategic ties with Israel. Despite current problems in the Turkish-Israeli relationship, Ankara "understands that its regional aspirations require correct relations with

[the] Jewish state."<sup>28</sup> Former Israeli Ambassador to Turkey Zvi Elpeleg also noted, "I do not think that relations will deteriorate because there are fundamental reasons why Turkey and Israel have the same interests."<sup>29</sup> Azerbaijan has attempted to play the mediator between the two countries following tensions and disagreements that emerged as a result of the Mavi Marmara incident. Undoubtedly, this type of mediation can expand Baku's role in Middle Eastern affairs and strengthen Azerbaijan's international standing.

Baku welcomes the triangular security and defense partnership between Turkey, Israel, and Azerbaijan. This model of cooperation has been successful concerning energy affairs.<sup>30</sup> The strategic triangular partnership could be an effective tool in strengthening and supporting U.S. diplomacy, as well as counterbalancing the Iran-Russia axis in the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

Modernizing the Azerbaijani Army as part of this defense cooperation is clearly the next and most important strategic dimension for Baku in its relations with Jerusalem. From 1992 to 1994, Israel supported Azerbaijan in a war with Armenia, supplying Stinger missiles and other weapons to Azerbaijani troops.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the Jews of Azerbaijan fought together with Azeris against the Armenians during this war. Albert Agarunov, an Azerbaijani Army officer and a Mountain Jew, became a national hero in Azerbaijan following the war.<sup>32</sup> More recently, in February 2012, as part of this bilateral defense cooperation, Azerbaijan signed a deal to purchase \$1.6 billion worth of arms from Israel.<sup>33</sup>

Last, Azerbaijan views its relations with Israel as part of a long-term strategy to develop close ties with the United States, in order to contain Iranian and Russian threats. Though Israeli-Azerbaijani cooperation has expanded to include foreign policy, the

military, economy, and intelligence, Azerbaijan does not have a diplomatic mission in Israel for fear of jeopardizing its relations with Muslim countries. Moreover, both sides do not want to publicize their relations. Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev described his country's relationship with the Jewish state as being like an iceberg: "nine-tenths of it is below the surface."<sup>34</sup>

### **ISRAEL'S PRIORITIES VIS-À-VIS AZERBAIJAN**

According to Dr. Ariel Cohen of the Washington, D.C.-based Heritage Foundation, "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."<sup>35</sup> In April 2012, Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman paid an official visit to Baku. He met with President Ilham Aliyev, with whom he 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 towards a possible attack on Iran."<sup>36</sup> Both Azerbaijan and Israel rejected the allegations. In Baku, Lieberman commented, "Such reports are from the sphere of science fiction and do not correspond with the truth."<sup>37</sup> Undoubtedly, Lieberman's visit once again confirmed the strategic character of the Israeli-Azerbaijani relationship. According to Israeli news media, "The foreign minister acknowledged that Israel and 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 UN Security Council.”<sup>38</sup>

Israeli policymakers consider Azerbaijan and the Caspian littoral as part of the Greater Middle East.<sup>39</sup> Israel, which for decades has had to deal with hostile neighboring Arab states, has attempted to improve its security as well as its foreign image and international relations. As part of this strategy, Israel has tried to develop relations with non-Arab Muslim states. "Expanding its influence into an area of the world heavily Muslim but not Arab has long been a strategic Israeli objective."<sup>40</sup> This strategy is designed not only to improve relations with the Islamic world, but also to demonstrate that Israel can have peaceful relations with Muslim states. It has attempted to prove that there is no Israel-Muslim or Jewish-Muslim confrontation. The collapse of the USSR provided a brilliant opportunity for Israel to develop relations with the newly independent former Soviet Muslim republics. As of this writing, Israel has successfully established diplomatic relations with nine non-Arab Muslim states.<sup>41</sup> In this light, Azerbaijan's experience of the peaceful cohabitation of Azeris and Jews was attractive for the Israeli political elite. This model served as a foundation upon which to develop a long-term partnership. Israeli policymakers enthusiastically responded to Azerbaijani attempts to establish close bilateral ties.

A key element in the Azerbaijan-Israel relationship has been their mutual concern over the Islamic Republic of Iran. Iran presents the most serious threat to Israel. As result, Jerusalem has launched a strategy of active diplomacy in the region surrounding Iran. At a May 2009 conference at the Center for Iranian Studies at Tel Aviv University, the former head of the Israeli Military Intelligence Directorate Major General Aharon Ze'evi Farkash said, "It is very important to form a coalition with the

moderate Sunnite countries which... [fear the] Iranian nuclear threat." In addition, 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."<sup>42</sup>

Thus, Azerbaijan, with its strategic location along Iran's northern border, plays an important part of Israel's foreign policy agenda vis-à-vis the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Israeli policymakers are aware of Azerbaijan's insecurity and mistrust towards Iran because of Tehran's aid to Armenia, which occupies territory internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan.

In this regard, Israel has repeatedly declared that Jerusalem supported Azerbaijani territorial integrity. The former Israeli ambassador to Turkey and the 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 dialogue with Armenia, on other hand, has always been interconnected with our relations with Turkey."<sup>43</sup>

Undoubtedly, Turkish cooperation is essential for Israel's foreign and security policy. Israel considers the Turkish-Azerbaijani alliance as a favorable factor for deepening and enhancing security and defense cooperation with Azerbaijan despite the cooling of Israel's relations with Ankara. Israel, for its part, considers the expansion of political and defense cooperation with



Azerbaijan an influential factor for improving its relations with Turkey. The Israeli military industry is now a major provider of advanced aviation, anti-tank artillery, and anti-infantry weapon systems to Azerbaijan. Furthermore, Israeli Aeronautics Defense Systems have helped Azerbaijan assemble unmanned aircrafts.<sup>44</sup> In February 2012, Israeli defense officials reportedly confirmed a deal to sell unmanned military aircrafts as well as anti-aircraft and missile defense systems to Azerbaijan for approximate \$1.6 billion.<sup>45</sup>

Israel and Azerbaijan maintain intense cooperate on security issues as well. In October 2001, President Heydar Aliyev met with Israel's ambassador, Eitan Naeh, and confirmed that "their positions in the fight against international terrorism... were identical." According to Israeli experts, groups like Hizb al-Tahrir pose a threat both to Jerusalem and to Baku. Israeli analysts also argue that some Wahhabi organizations may be operating in Azerbaijan.<sup>46</sup> Security cooperation between the two countries has entailed intelligence exchanges, data analysis (including satellite information), briefings, and other activities. Israel also trains Azerbaijani security and intelligence services and provides security for the Azeri president on foreign visits. Some sources also report that Israel has set up electronic listening stations along the Caspian Sea and Iranian border.<sup>47</sup>

Israel's next priority is to counter the Iranian intelligence network in Azerbaijan and in other Muslim countries of the CIS. Iran has attempted to expand its political influence to its immediate neighbors as well as to intensify intelligence operations, particularly in Azerbaijan. According to Azerbaijani media reports, the national security services have arrested 22 people who were sent by Iran to carry out terrorist attacks against the U.S. and Israeli embassies, as well as against 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. In January 2012, Azerbaijan's 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 providing intelligence on Western and Israeli activities.<sup>48</sup>

Azeri-Israeli security cooperation is vital and beneficial for both Baku and Jerusalem. The failure of the Azerbaijani-Israeli alliance to work together to counter Iran would be irresponsible and would have unpredictable consequences for Baku and Jerusalem. Tehran's attempts to expand its Shi'i and Iranian ideology could have a catastrophic impact on Azerbaijan's potential to be an independent and strong American ally in the region. It is clear that the fall of secular Azerbaijan would badly damage Israel's security and America's strategic interests. Moreover, this would strengthen Iran and create a totally new balance of power in the Greater Middle East, particularly in the South Caucasus and Caspian basin, as well as in Central Asia.

Last, Azerbaijani energy is a critical factor in Israel's strategic calculations. In 2011, Azerbaijan exported as much as to 2.5 million tons (about 18.5 million barrels) of oil with total worth of \$2.1 billion to Israel. Last year trade turnover between Israel and Azerbaijan reached \$4 billion, making Azerbaijan Israel's top trade partner within CIS countries.<sup>49</sup> According to 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."<sup>50</sup>

Israeli-Azerbaijani energy cooperation has clearly become an extremely important

factor for Israel's energy security. This cooperation allows for the diversification of supplies of oil and gas and for exploration of Israel's energy resources. Baku provides Jerusalem with over one-third of Israel's oil supply.<sup>51</sup> As a result of former Israeli Foreign Minister Lieberman's April 2012 visit to Baku, SOCAR will start drilling in Med Ashdod, Israel's oil field, located 16 kilometers off the Mediterranean coast. The 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."<sup>52</sup> The project is SOCAR's first oil-production or drilling operation outside of Azerbaijan. The contract allows SOCAR to gain international experience and expand its operations in Turkey, Georgia, Israel, and other countries.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES**

It is well-known that the United States has declared the Caspian basin as vital to its national interests. In this context, the Israeli-Azerbaijani partnership is an effective tool to strengthen and support America's strategic presence in this very sensitive part of the world. Furthermore, the Israeli-Azerbaijani alliance to counter Iran has strategic importance for U.S. interests, particularly in the Greater Middle East and Central Asia. Unlike Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia are America's allies in the South Caucasus and the Caspian basin. 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 Caucasus affairs jeopardizes America's strategic interests in the region. Unlike the Clinton administration and the Bush administration, the Obama

administration has not been active in managing Iranian and Russian influence in this part of the world. 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 or minimize U.S. political activity and increases pressure on Washington's allies.

Indeed, Azerbaijan is under double pressure from Iran and Russia and needs strong U.S. support to secure its national independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. Azerbaijan's pro-Western independence ensures a U.S. strategic presence in the Caspian basin and facilitates its power projection deep into Asia. In this context, Azerbaijan is of the utmost geostrategic importance for the United States. The loss of a secular and independent Azerbaijan, as previously discussed, would badly damage both U.S. and EU strategic interests. The United States should thus support Israeli-Azerbaijani cooperation in order to counter the regional threat and to strengthen both countries' security as reliable U.S. allies.

## **CONCLUSION**

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the historically close and warm relations between Jews and Azeris became a solid base for mutual cooperation between the State of Israel and the Republic of Azerbaijan. Both countries are strategically located but in hostile environments. This has strengthened their rapprochement and led to expanded cooperation.

Despite strong opposition from Tehran and Moscow, Azerbaijan has established a close partnership with Israel. Today, Baku and Jerusalem are partners on a wide range of issues. The insecurity and regional threats have pushed both Azerbaijan and Israel to

create a strategic alliance that enhances security and defense capabilities.

However, the future of the Israeli-Azerbaijani relationship depends on the political nature of the ruling power in Azerbaijan. Iran continues its attempts to spread its Islamic Revolution ideology into Azerbaijan through Shi'i propaganda, while expanding its intelligence network in Baku and other major Azerbaijani cities.

The strengthening of pro-Islamist or Shi'i political forces would have a catastrophic impact on Azerbaijan's political future as a secular state and a strong Israeli and American ally. In this light, the strengthening of ties in all areas is crucial in order to combat Iranian influence. It is also of fundamental importance that the Azeri-Jewish/Israeli-Azerbaijani alliance is cultivated as a long-term and mutually advantageous relationship.

One idea for a joint project is the establishment of a university named after Baku-born Nobel Prize laureate Lev Landau (Lev Landau University). The university, financed by Israel or by both sides, could offer Jewish studies as well as other disciplines. An Azeri Studies center could also be opened at one of the major Israeli universities, such as at Tel Aviv University.

Initiatives like these would contribute to the development of the history and culture of both nations and would thus strengthen ties and create a solid foundation for maintaining relations in the long-term.

With its pro-Western foreign policy, Azerbaijan is strategically important for U.S. and Israeli interests in the Greater Middle East and in the post-Soviet space. Ensuring Azerbaijan's future as a secular, independent state should be a key priority for Israel and the United States. It is likely that the new U.S. administration will intensify efforts to support Azerbaijan's independence and territorial integrity in order to position it under NATO's security

umbrella and to protect the strategic Western oil infrastructure in the Caspian basin. Richard Morningstar's 2012 nomination as U.S. Ambassador to Azerbaijan was a strategic move aimed to revive and push forward U.S. diplomacy in the South Caucasus and Caspian basin.

With regard to any military option to stop Iran's nuclear program, Azerbaijan continues to attempt to remain neutral. On a May 29, 2012, visit to Tehran, the 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 friend country."

Indeed, Baku would like to avoid any possible military clashes with Iran and maintain its neutrality. However, Azerbaijan's actions and pragmatic foreign policy indicate that Baku's position is more pro-Western than pro-Iranian. Baku will thus continue to cooperate with Israel in order to protect and advance Azerbaijani national interests.

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## NOTES

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