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THE AZERBAIJAN-ISRAEL RELATIONS: A NON-DIPLOMATIC, BUT STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

DİPLOMATİK OLMAYAN AMA STRATEJİK ORTAKLIK: AZERBAYCAN-İSRAİL İLİŞKİLERİ

Shamkhal ABILOV*

ABSTRACT

This article is based on political, strategic, and economic relations between Azerbaijan and Israel. Throughout history Azerbaijan has been home of several Jews communities, such as Mountain Jews, Ashkenazi and etc, which played an important role in relationship between these two countries. With the collapse of Soviet Union, Azerbaijan got its independence in 1991. Since that period of time Azerbaijan has put strenuous efforts to create the bilateral relations with the leading world countries for preserving its independence, and avoid Russian and Iranian influence. Despite its religious origin and neighborhood with Iran, Israel was one of the priorities in the foreign policy of Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan developed its relationship with Israel in all contexts. It was one of the strategic partners in Nagorno-Karabagh war between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Key Words: Azerbaijan, Israel, Azerbaijani Jews, Strategic Cooperation, Energy Policy

ÖZET

Bu makalede Azerbaycan ve İsrail arasında stratejik, siyasi ve ekonomik ilişkiler incelenmektedir. Azerbaycan, Tarih boyunca iki ülke arasındaki ilişkilerde önemli rolü olan Dağ Yahudileri, Aşkenazlar ve benzeri toplulukların evi olmuştur. Azerbaycan, bağımsızlığını elde ettikten sonra bağımsızlığını korumak, Rusya ve İran'ın etkisini önlemek amacıyla dünyanın önde gelen devletleri ile ikili ilişkiler oluşturmak için çaba göstermiştir. Halkının çoğunluğunun Müslüman olması ve İran ile komşu olmasına rağmen, İsrail ile ilişkiler Azerbaycan dış politikasının öncelikleri arasında yer almıştır. Azerbaycan birçok konuda İsrail ile ilişkilerini geliştirmiş, Ermenistan'la arasındaki Dağlık Karabağ Savaşı'nda İsrail Azerbaycan'ın stratejik ortaklarından biri olmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Azerbaycan, İsrail, Azerbaycan Yahudileri, Stratejik İşbirliği, Enerji Politikası

Introduction

With the collapse of the Soviet Union there was great development in the world politics not only because of the end of the Cold War and geopolitical changes, but also as a matter of the competition over economics and secure

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energy resources. These developments had a great impact on newly independent Azerbaijan. After regaining its independence in 1991, Azerbaijan faced reorganization of its foreign policy. It was seeking a political, economic and strategic partner to preserve its independence. Since these tasks were too complex, Azerbaijan tried to establish diplomatic relations and missions with the leading world countries during the first month of its independence. Full diplomatic relations were first established with its brother country, Turkey, then the U.S., and also, its southern neighbor, Iran. The relationship between Azerbaijan and Israel was also developed in this frame. These two states improved their relationship in the context of economic, political, and strategic spheres.

From Historical Background to the Strategic Ally

Azerbaijan is the third Muslim country after Turkey and Egypt to develop bilateral strategic and economic relations with Israel. But despite the developed relationship between these states, Azerbaijan has no full diplomatic relations with Israel. This factor has a great impact on the relations between the two. During her interview with the Azerbaijani news agency Today.Az, Israeli Foreign Minister Tsipi Livni also addressed the Azerbaijani government, asking why an Azerbaijani embassy has not been opened in Israel.¹ The following parts of this article explain the answer to this question and the general political, economical, and strategic relations between Azerbaijan and Israel.

Azerbaijan is a secular state with a population of eight million predominantly Shiite and ethnically Turkic citizens. Despite its religious identity, Azerbaijan has no anti-Semitic tradition in its history.² From the late 19th century, Baku, the capital city of Azerbaijan, was one of the centers of the Zionist movement in the Russian empire. And also, the first Havevei Zion (Lovers of Zion) was created here in 1891, followed by the first Zionist organization in 1899.³

The movement remained strong during the two years of the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan (1918-1920), which were marked with the establishment of the Jewish Popular University in 1919, and a number of schools, social clubs, benevolent societies and cultural organizations. Even the Minister of Health,

¹ Israeli Foreign Minister: "The Issue Why the Azerbaijani Embassy does not Open in Israel should be Addressed to the Azerbaijani Government", *Today. Az*, 10 November 2008.

² Joanna Sloane, "The Virtual Jewish History Tour Azerbaijan", *Jewish Virtual Library*, 20 July 2006.

³ "Baku", *The Electronic Jewish Encyclopedia*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 15 April 2005; (<http://www.eleven.co.il/?mode=article&id=10381>).

Dr. Yevsei Gindes, of the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan was an Ashkenazi Jew.⁴

But after the occupation of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic by the Red Army in 1920, Soviet Rule was established in Azerbaijan. Russia was one of the birth places of anti-Semitism in Europe, and during the civil war in Russia after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, following their anti-Semitist attitude, soldiers of Red Army engaged in a pogrom against the Jewish population, killing tens of thousands of Jews between 1918 and 1920.⁵ However, this policy was also continued in Azerbaijan through a different approach by the occupation of Azerbaijan. All Jewish cultural organizations, social clubs, and schools were closed and nationalized.⁶ But in the early 1960s, with the new soft policy of the Soviet Union after the death of Stalin, the Azerbaijani Jewish community experienced a cultural revival. Jewish samizdat (Samostoyatelnoe Izdatelstvo – an independent publication; during the Soviet Union there was such a publication, which had no connection to the state) started publications.⁷ In 1982 the first legal Hebrew courses and the first Jewish Sochnut School in the Soviet Union was opened in Baku. Many cultural and Zionist organizations have been re-established in Baku and Sumgait since 1987.⁸

Today the country is proud of its good relations with Israel and the Jewish minority in the country. The Jewish community serves as an important factor in Azerbaijani bilateral economic and diplomatic relations with Israel and the United States. Azerbaijan is home to some 11,000 Jews, residing primarily in Baku, Sumqayit, Oguz, and the Krasnaya Sloboda settlement in the Quba district of Azerbaijan. There are also nearly 5000 Ashkenazi Jews living mostly in Baku. Historically, Jews in Azerbaijan have been represented by various subgroups, mainly Mountain Jews, Ashkenazi Jews and Georgian Jews. Azerbaijan is also home to smaller communities of Krymchaks, Kurdish Jews and Bukharian Jews, and non-Jewish Judaistic groups like Subbotniks and Gers.⁹ But two of these groups, Mountain and Ashkenazi Jews, are the majority.

There are different explanations for the settlement of the Mountain Jews in this territory, like that their origin comes from the Khazar Turks, who

⁴ "Azerbaijan", *The Electronic Jewish Encyclopedia*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 01 September 2004; (<http://www.eleven.co.il/?mode=article&id=10098>).

⁵ Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy Explaining Ethnic Cleansing*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 64.

⁶ "Leader of Mountain Jews: Jews have Never Been Oppressed in Azerbaijan", *Regnum News Agency*, 24 January 2006.

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Michael Sapozhnikov, "Baku, Azerbaijan, Jews and The Klionskys"; (http://www.klionsky.org/migration_albums/baku/baku.pdf).

⁹ Yaakov Katz, "A Lesson in Coexistence", *The Federation of Jewish Communities of the CIS*, 09 March 2006; (<http://www.fjc.ru/news/newsArticle.asp?AID=366948>).

converted to Judaism or migrated from Persia nearly three hundred years ago.¹⁰ But the commonly accepted theory is that Jews have been settled in the territory of Azerbaijan since the 5th century BC, after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple by Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC. During his ruling period, a number of Jews from the Judean kingdom moved north to today's Azerbaijan. After the defeat of the Babylon Empire by the Achaemenian Empire in 539, King Cyrus of the Persian Empire decreed the return of the Jews to Jerusalem, but some of the Jewish population remained settled in the northern territory. This population became the Mountain Jews. They currently dominate the Jewish community in Azerbaijan and speak the distinct dialect of the Tat language known as Juhiri or Judaeo-Tat.¹¹

The first Ashkenazi Jews came to Azerbaijan at the beginning of the nineteenth century with the occupation of Czarist Russia. But the mass migration of them started in the 1870s with the first oil boom in Azerbaijan. They settled mainly in the oil-rich city of Baku. Even one of the Russian leading oil companies, The Caspian Black Sea Company, was owned by the notable and wealthy Jewish family, the Rothschilds.¹² With the outbreak of the Second World War the immigration of the Ashkenazi Jews to Azerbaijan increased. They mainly came from Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus as a result of the anti-Semitism in Europe.¹³

Beginning in the 1980s a mass scale emigration of Jews from Azerbaijan to other countries, mainly the U.S., Israel, and Canada, began due to the unstable political and economic conditions, and the outbreak of war in Nagorno-Karabakh between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Recently, the Azerbaijani government granted Israeli citizens of Azerbaijani origin, who were involved in the trade and economical relations between Azerbaijan and Israel, with dual citizenship.¹⁴

Currently, Azerbaijan is home to five synagogues, three in Baku and two in Guba city,¹⁵ and ten to fifteen Jewish organizations, including the Baku Religious Community of European Jews, an Israeli center with educational programs, a Jewish Women's Organization, a War Veterans' Society, a Jewish newspaper, the Azerbaijan-Israel Friendship Organization, and the Havva

¹⁰ Inga Saffron, "The Mountain Jews of Guba", *Journal of Azerbaijan International*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 21 July 1998, pp. 46-47.

¹¹ Alexander Murinson, "Azerbaijani-Jewish Relations: Realpolitik Embedded in History", CA&CC Press, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2008, pp. 160-161.

¹² Shirin Akiner, *The Caspian: Politics, Energy and Security*, (Oxford, RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), pp. 90-91.

¹³ Semyon Ikhiilov & Cennadiy Zelmanovich, "Address of Jewish Diaspora of Azerbaijan", OSCE, 19 June 2003; (http://www.osce.org/documents/sg/2003/06/251_en.pdf).

¹⁴ "Azerbaijan: The Status of Armenians, Russians, Jews and Other Minorities", INS Resource Information Center, 1993, pp. 16-17; (<http://www.uscis.gov/files/nativedocuments/azerba93.pdf>).

¹⁵ Arzu Aghayeva, "The Biggest Synagoge of Baku, Azerbaijan", 25 February 2005; (<http://www.skyscrapercity.com/archive/index.php/t-184541.html>).

Welfare Center for Women and Children. The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee operates a Jewish kindergarten, a community center, a Hesed charity center, and a Hillel student center.¹⁶ The Jewish community also has their own website. With the initiative of Rabbi Meir Bruk, the Chief Rabbi of Azerbaijan and Head of the Ohr Avner Chabad Day School in Baku, the website was designed to inform people about the Jewish community in Azerbaijan, its history, tradition, culture, important meetings, and community events.¹⁷

While looking at the relations of Israel with the Republic of Azerbaijan since its independence in 1991, Azerbaijan has had good relations on strategic matters, security, and trade, cultural and educational exchanges with Israel. After Azerbaijan's independence, there were diplomatic negotiations over the exchange of ambassadors between the two states. Eliezer Yotvat was appointed as the first Israeli ambassador to Azerbaijan. But the Azerbaijani embassy has not yet opened in Israel.¹⁸ The President of Azerbaijan, Haydar Aliyev, pledged to open an embassy in Israel and sent his foreign policy advisor Vafa Guluzade to visit the Israeli government.¹⁹ But, due to political issues, Azerbaijan has still not fulfilled its responsibility to open an embassy in Israel. Azerbaijan has said that its complicated geopolitical situation, particularly its proximity to Iran, as well as its membership in international Islamic organizations, have prevented it from opening a mission in Israel.

In spite of this, Azerbaijan-Israel strategic cooperation grows step by step. The Azerbaijani government does have an unofficial representative, AZAL (Azerbaijan National Airline), in Israel. In addition to AZAL, the newly opened bureau of Lider TV Channel unofficially represents the Azerbaijani government in Israel. It was the first time for an Azerbaijani television network to send a permanent correspondent to report from Israel and send reports from Israel and other Middle East states to the Azerbaijani audience.²⁰

On August 27, 2007 the Azerbaijani Congress was established in Israel in order to represent the interests of the Azerbaijani people and government. Due to the absence of a diplomatic mission of Azerbaijan in Israel, the Congress deals with many Diaspora organizations, cultural and traditional works. Congress also has established the Azerbaijani Cultural Center in Israel, which plays a crucial role in the bilateral relations between Azerbaijan and Israel.

¹⁶ Lev Krichevsky, "In Meeting with Jews, Azeri Leader Hints at Stronger Relations with Israel", NCSJ-National Conference on Soviet Jewry, February 2006; (<http://www.ncsj.org/AuxPages/021306Azerbaijan.shtml>).

¹⁷ "Jewish Community of Azerbaijan Launches Website", *The Federation of Jewish Communities of the CIS*, 15 November 2004; (<http://www.fjc.ru/news/newsArticle.asp?AID=221938>).

¹⁸ Hilary Leila Krieger, "Azerbaijan to Open Trade Office in Israel", *Jerusalem Post*, 17 May 2006.

¹⁹ Arye Gut, "Why Azerbaijan's Relations with Israel Are So Close?", *Azerbaijan in the World ADA Biweekly Newsletter*, Vol. 2, No. 8, 15 April 2009; (<http://ada.edu.az/biweekly/issues/vol2no8/20090422020043096.html>).

²⁰ "Lider TV Sets up Permanent Bureau in Israel", *İsrail Xəbərləri*, January 2007; (<http://baku.mfa.gov.il/mfm/Data/108345.pdf>).

According to Mr. Shapiro-Suliman, the Azerbaijani Cultural Centre will unite Azerbaijanis and natives of Azerbaijan who live in Israel and who are interested in the development of the language, customs, culture and history of the country.²¹ “The Cultural Centre will promote national relations in Israel and involve Azerbaijanis and natives of Azerbaijan in different social and cultural events of the country. The key goal of the centre is to develop the language, culture, national traditions as well as to create an Azerbaijani library,” stated Bakhtiyar Yakubov, the vice president of the Congress.²²

The Islamic Republic of Iran, the southern neighbor of Azerbaijan, has worried about the development of the relations between Azerbaijan and Israel since the independence of Azerbaijan. For that reason, after Ilham Aliyev became the president of Azerbaijan in October 2003, Iran, the biggest threat for Israel in the Middle East, tried to improve diplomatic relations with Azerbaijan with the aim to persuade Azerbaijan to cut relations with Israel. Even several high-level Iranian military officers visited Baku in August 2004 and intended Azerbaijan to cease security cooperation with Israel and stop receiving Israeli military and intelligence officers.²³

But for Azerbaijan to have a relationship with Israel is much more important than Iran, because Israel was one of the strategic partners and supporters of Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh War with Armenia. As a result of the Nagorno-Karabakh War, nearly 20% of Azerbaijan territory was occupied by Armenian troops and remains under the control of Armenia today. The war caused almost one million Azeris to flee Armenia and the occupied territories.²⁴ In this war Iran and Russia traditionally supported Armenia. When war broke out, Iran remained largely neutral despite the fact that a large Shiite majority inhabited Azerbaijan. Iran, a country ruled by Muslim Shiites, has an Azeri ethnic minority population living in the northwest corner of the country, known as “southern Azerbaijan”, totaling more than 25 million people, compared with a population of 8 million in Azerbaijan.²⁵

Iran was suspicious that support for Azerbaijan against Armenia would encourage the unification of the two “divided” Azerbaijanis that had been

²¹ Arye Gut, “Diaspora Plays Key Role in Promoting Azerbaijan-Israel Relations”, *Azerbaijan in the World ADA Biweekly Newsletter*, Vol. 1, No. 9, 01 June 2008, pp. 10-11; (<http://www.ada.edu.az/buyweekly2/issues/149/20090327123606911.html>).

²² “Azerbaijani Cultural Centre to be Established in Israel”, *Embassy of Azerbaijan Washington, D.C.*, 19 November 2007; (<http://azembassy.us/new/news.php?id=537>).

²³ “Iran Bullies Israel’s Strategic Friends - with Eye on Washington”-Special report, *DEBKAfile*, 22 August 2004; (<http://www2.debka.com/article.php?aid=893>).

²⁴ Clare Doyle, “Genocide Debate Complicates Search for Karabakh Peace”, *Euroasianet.org*, 03 June 2002; (<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eavo30602a.shtml>).

²⁵ Ali Valiyev, “Brothers, Neighbors, Rivals”, *TOL*, 17 March 2009; (<http://www.tol.cz/look/TOL/article.tpl?IdLanguage=1&IdPublication=4&NrIssue=313&NrSection=4&NrArticle=20457>).

separated by the Persian and Russian Empires since the 19th century.²⁶ Thus, Iran supported Armenia against Azerbaijan. Even in April 1992, for example, Iran supplied natural gas and fuel to Armenia, which helped to sustain Armenian action.²⁷ Armenia is a potential buffer for Iran against the future rise of power of Azerbaijan. Besides, there are close relations on trade, energy, and transportation between Iran and Armenia. In 2007 Iran and Armenia signed an agreement for the construction of an oil pipeline from Iran to the border city of Meghri, Armenia.²⁸ They also concluded an agreement regarding a railway that would connect these two countries with the Black Sea. The 470-kilometer railway would take five years to build and cost up to \$1.2 billion to complete.²⁹

But on the other hand, in response to the Armenian occupation of Azerbaijani lands, Turkey closed its border with Armenia in April 1993.³⁰ Throughout the conflict, Israel, a strategic ally of Turkey, also supported the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. According to London-based Arabic language weekly *al-Wassat*, during the Nagorno-Karabakh War Israel and Turkey provided Stinger missiles to Azerbaijan.³¹ Even many Azerbaijanis expressed the hope that friendship with Israel might help resolve the continued Nagorno-Karabakh dispute and expedite Azerbaijan's integration with the West.

According to the Washington Institute Israel also provides training for Azerbaijani security and intelligence services, as well as security for the Azerbaijani president during his foreign visits. Israel might have also set up electronic listening stations along the Caspian Sea and Iranian border.³² With the unofficial visit of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to Baku in 1997, the relations between two countries entered a new phase. Since that time Israel has been developing closer relations with Azerbaijan for modernizing the Armed Forces of Azerbaijan. The Israeli military has been a

²⁶ Fariz Ismailzade, "New Tensions Complicate Relations between Baku and Tehran", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 3, No. 62, 30 March 2006; (http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=31532).

²⁷ Soner Cagaptay & Alexandr Murinson, "Good Relation between Azerbaijan and Israel: A Model for Other Muslim States in Eurasia?", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 30 March 2005; (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateCo5.php?CID=2287>).

²⁸ "Iran, Armenia Insist on Energy and Trade Ties", *Tehran Times*, 14 April 2009; (http://www.tehrantimes.com/index_View.asp?code=192190).

²⁹ "Railway to Link Iran, Armenia to Black Sea", *Press TV*, 04 April 2009; (<http://www.presstv.ir/detail.aspx?id=90405§ionid=351020102>).

³⁰ J. Babayeva, "Over 13,000 People Join Campaign on Collecting Signatures against Opening of Turkey-Armenia Border", *Topix*, 10 April 2009.

³¹ Bulent Aras, "Post-Cold War Realities: Israel's Strategy in Azerbaijan and Central Asia", *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 5, No. 4, January 1998, pp.73-74

³² "Israel and Azerbaijan: Baku's Balancing Act", *CRIA*, 02 February 2009; (http://cria-online.org/CU_-_file_-_article_-_sid_-_21.html).

major provider of battlefield aviation, artillery, antitank, and anti-infantry weapons to Azerbaijan.³³

According to the Haaretz news agency, the Israeli Defense Ministry and Azerbaijani government signed an arms deal worth hundreds of millions of dollars. Following the agreement, a number of Israeli firms were involved in the deal. Soltam will sell mortars and ammunition to Azerbaijan, Israel Military Industries will sell the country rocket artillery and Tadrian Communications will sell it radio equipment.³⁴ In sum, Iran and Armenia see that cooperation between Azerbaijan and Israel is a big threat for Iranian-Armenian relations, and also perceive Azerbaijan as a part of a geostrategic axis that also includes Turkey, Armenia's historical "enemy" , Israel, and Georgia. As a result, they want to disrupt that axis.

Another aspect of warm relations between Israel and Azerbaijan is the currently evolving strategic partnership of both countries with Turkey and the United States. By this cooperation, Azerbaijan and Turkey try to ensure the support of the Israel-American lobby for preventing the attempt of a small but powerful Armenian-American lobby from influencing U.S. foreign policy toward these countries.³⁵

Israel also stood with Azerbaijan to avoid U.S. Congressional Amendment 907, adopted during the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno Karabakh.³⁶ 907 is an Amendment to the Freedom Support Act, passed by the US government on October 24, 1992 to provide financial, technical, and other forms of assistance to the former Soviet Union republics in order to support freedom and open markets in the new independent states. But under pressure from the Armenian lobby in the United States, Section 907 prohibits the provision of U.S. assistance "to the Government of Azerbaijan until the President determines . . . that the Government of Azerbaijan is taking demonstrable steps to cease all blockades and other offensive uses of force against Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh."³⁷

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks Azerbaijan took sides with America as an ally against world terrorism. Since then a new sphere of security cooperation has emerged with the U.S. Azerbaijan has provided an air corridor for American military efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq and has joined the U.S. led coalition in

³³ R. Hrair Dekmejian & Hovann H. Simonian, *Troubled Waters the Geopolitics of the Caspian Region*, (London: I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd, 2003), pp. 125-126.

³⁴ Yossi Melman, "Israel and Azerbaijan Close Multi-million Dollar Arms Deal", *Haaretz*, 26 September 2008.

³⁵ Svante E.Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*, (Surrey: Routledge Curzon, 2000), pp. 393-394.

³⁶ Amikam Nachmani, "The Remarkable Turkish-Israeli Tie", *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 5, No. 2, June 1998, p. 22.

³⁷ Mahir Ibrahimov & Erjan Kurbanov, "Policy Brief: Getting it Wrong in the Caucasus", *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 4, December 1994, p. 65.

Kosovo and Iraq.³⁸ These events also improved the Azerbaijan-Israel relations strategically, because Israel is one of the major partners of the U.S. in the Middle East.

Coming to economic relations between these states, the Azerbaijan-Israel Friendship Society, which was organized in 1990,³⁹ promotes bilateral diplomatic and economic contact between Azerbaijan and Israel. Since the creation of the relations, economic cooperation between Israel and Azerbaijan has grown significantly. Attempting to deregulate industry and to create a free market and liberal economy attracted Israeli companies to Azerbaijani markets. Many companies have invested in the service sector. Bakcell, which was started as a joint venture between the Ministry of Communication of Azerbaijan and GTIB (Israel) in early 1994 as a first cellular telephone operator in the country, can be a good example.⁴⁰

According to the President of the Azerbaijan-Israel Business Forum, many Israeli companies also operate in the energy sector of Azerbaijan. For instance, an Israeli-based supplier of high technology to the energy industry, mainly oil and gas field, Modcom System Ltd. opened an office in Azerbaijan in 2000.⁴¹ According to UN statistical analyses, the exports of Azerbaijan have increased from \$2 million U.S. dollars to \$323 million U.S. dollars between 1997 and 2004.⁴²

On June 5, 2005, the 14th "Caspian Oil and Gas Exhibition" was opened in Baku. In his speech during the exhibition Arthur Lenk, the former Ambassador of Israel to Azerbaijan since April 2005, talked about continuous trade between Azerbaijan and Israel in the energy sector. Israel and Azerbaijan have close political and economic relations. During his interview with the Azerbaijani news agency APA, Mr. Ambassador said: "The main thing is that Israel buys Azerbaijan's oil through the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. Interstate relations are also strengthening and the ministries of the two countries pay mutual visits. Azerbaijani Economic Development Minister Heydar Babayev visited Israel in February, chief of State Committee for Azerbaijanis Living Abroad

³⁸ Tamine Adeebfar, "Azerbaijan's Geopolitical Challenge: Improving Relations with Iran", *Middle East Economic Survey*, Vol. 49, No. 49, 04 December 2006; (<http://www.mees.com/postedarticles/oped/v49n49-5ODo1.htm>).

³⁹ Alexander Murinson, "Azerbaijani-Jewish Relations: Realpolitik Embedded in History".

⁴⁰ "Final Report: Monitoring of Russia and Ukraine (priority1) and Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan and Moldova (priority 2): Telecommunications and the Information Society", *Political Inelegance & Internews*, December 2006; (http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/internationalrel/docs/pi_study_rus_ukr_arm_azerb_bel_geor_kaz_mold/o_cover_page.pdf).

⁴¹ Ilya Bourtnan, "Israel and Azerbaijan's Furtive Embrace", *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 3, Summer 2006, pp. 47-57.

⁴² Ibid.

Nazim Ibrahimov in April and Transport Minister Ziya Mammadov visited Israel two weeks ago. Israeli Foreign Ministry official Joseph Gal has also visited Azerbaijan recently. Deputy Prime Ministers – Minister of Strategic Planning Avigdor Liberman and Transport Minister Shaul Mofaz will visit Azerbaijan in the second half of this year. Our positions coincide in most strategic issues. I think that the relations between Azerbaijan and Israel are of strategic character”.⁴³

There is also growing covert collaboration in the energy sector between Azerbaijan and Israel. Israel is the second largest importer of Azerbaijani oil after Italy. Annual trade turnover between our two countries, mostly driven by oil, stands at about \$1.3 billion.⁴⁴ Energy security is an important part of this bilateral relationship due to Azerbaijan's vast energy resources and its geographic position: It is the east-west passageway to the land-locked Caspian and its petrochemical resources, as well as an important link to Central Asia's natural resources. Israel began to import Azerbaijani oil in 1991 after the independence of Azerbaijan.⁴⁵ Even before the BTC project began, former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during his visit to Azerbaijan in 1997 expressed Israeli interest in importing Azerbaijani oil through this pipeline. Currently, Israel depends almost entirely on imports for its oil and receives almost one-six of its crude oil supply from Azerbaijan.⁴⁶

As it was mentioned above, energy is a major component of the relationship between Azerbaijan and Israel and the construction of the BTC pipeline was the turning point of this cooperation. The inauguration ceremony of BTC oil pipeline took place in the Turkish Mediterranean port on July 6, 2006. The attendance of the Israeli Minister of National Infrastructures Binyamin Ben-Eliezer shows the importance of this pipeline for the Israeli energy policy toward Azerbaijan.⁴⁷ The Israeli high official was one of the representatives from 36 countries who attended the ceremony. Furthermore, Israel is concerned about building an extension of the BTC pipeline to its Red Sea port in Eilat in order to deliver Azerbaijani and Central Asian oil to Indian, Japan, South Korean markets through Israel's Tipline.⁴⁸

⁴³ “Israeli Ambassador: Azerbaijan and Israel Have Strategic Relations”, *APA*, 27 June 2007; (<http://en.apa.az/news.php?id=29490>).

⁴⁴ Alex Kogan, “Azerbaijan: Israel's Problematic Energy Provider”, *The Jerusalem Post*, 07 November 2007; (<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1192380757626&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>).

⁴⁵ “Israel and Azerbaijan”, *Azerbaijan in the World ADA Biweekly Newsletter*, 01 May 2008; (<http://www.ada.edu.az/biweekly/issues/147/20090328035810742.html>).

⁴⁶ “Azerbaijan-Israel to Buy Azeri Light & Provide Passage to Eastern Markets”, *AllBusiness*, 17 July 2006; (<http://www.allbusiness.com/sector-21-mining/oil-gas-extraction-crude/1185757-1.html>).

⁴⁷ Michel Chossudovsky, “The War on Lebanon and the Battle for Oil”, *Global Research*, 26 July 2006; (<http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=2824>).

⁴⁸ Michael Piskur, “The BTC Pipeline and the Increasing Importance of Energy Supply Routes”, *PINR*, 08 August 2006; (http://www.pinr.com/report.php?ac=view_report&report_id=537&lang

During his visit to Azerbaijan in order to participate in the annual Caspian Oil and Gas show in Baku, Benjamin Ben-Eliezer said that his country was interested in exporting Azerbaijani oil. "We and the Azerbaijani side are interested in transporting Azerbaijani oil from Ceyhan through the 'Ashkelon-Elot' pipeline towards the Red Sea and from there to such large markets as India and China," he said. "This pipeline is the shortest and cheapest way from the Mediterranean to the Red Sea".⁴⁹ Over the past year, discussions have begun examining the feasibility of a pipeline corridor – with the possibility of carrying oil and natural gas from Turkey to Israel. Such a plan, if carried out, would extend the position of Azerbaijan crude oil to the edge of the Indian Ocean

In an interview with the Azeri News agency APA, Israeli former Ambassador Arthur Lenk said that, "Israel is Azerbaijan's second largest partner in the business field" on April 29, 2009. "Israel purchases oil from Azerbaijan and it assumes great importance for us. According to the outcomes of 2008, the commodity turnover between the two countries totals \$180 million, but we don't want to be satisfied with this figure. We are eager to have more business". The Ambassador also stressed that we will try to increase the trade turnover between Azerbaijan and Israel, which in January-March 2009 reached \$180 million.⁵⁰

Israeli officials also expressed interest in the purchase of Azerbaijani gas after Egypt decided to increase the price of the exported gas.⁵¹ Under pressure from the opposition groups, Egyptian officials declared that all signed natural gas deals would be reconsidered, including the deal with Israel. Following this event Israeli government tried to find alternative gas resources. In an interview with the Azerbaijani news agency Trend, Israeli Infrastructure Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer said that Israel is in talks with Baku over a potential agreement that could be worth USD \$40 billion in Azerbaijani gas exports.⁵²

Israel is exploring the possibility of importing oil and gas from the Caspian Sea region, as Israel is surrounded with oil rich countries, but has no chance to get it. Due to these factors partnership with Azerbaijan is significant for Israel. After the discovery of the vast gas resources in the Azerbaijani Shah Deniz

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⁴⁹ Fariz Ismailzade, "Israel Show Interest in Azerbaijani Energy and Trade Projects", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 09 June 2006; ([http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=31770](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=31770)).

⁵⁰ Lachin Sultanova, "Israel is Azerbaijan's Second Big Partner in Business Field", APA, 29 April 2009; (<http://en.apa.az/news.php?id=101380>).

⁵¹ Adam Morrow & Khaled Moussa al-Omrani, "Egypt: Opposition Slams Gas Sale to Israel", *IPS*, 29 February 2009; (<http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=41408>).

⁵² Nissan Ratzlav-Katz, "Israel Looks at Azerbaijan Option as Egypt 'Reviews' Gas Exports", *EJC*, 11 June 2008; (http://eurojewcong.org/ejc/news.php?id_article=2067).

field, Azerbaijan reached the extraction volume of 9 billion cubic meters annually, with the potential to reach 24 billion cubic meters. Israel intended to buy part of its 1.7 billion cubic meters of imported gas from Azerbaijan.⁵³ Israeli Minister Ben-Eliezer also offered, in addition to the BTC pipeline, to extend the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline to Ceyhan in order to transport Azerbaijani gas. “Our government is interested in buying as much gas as Azerbaijan can offer. I have discussed this issue with the Turkish Prime Minister and we will continue the negotiations on this”.⁵⁴

On the other hand, Israel investors are not interested only in the energy sector, but also in agriculture, Azerbaijan’s largest employer and second largest sector after oil. The Israeli government intends to transfer its technical expertise in such highly developed fields as medicine, agriculture, and irrigation to Azerbaijan. On February 21, 2006 the Azerbaijani-Israeli agricultural business forum was held in Guba, the northern city where the Jews are living. Businessmen from Northern Azerbaijan and Israel came together to discuss technologies applied in the processing and packing of agricultural products, drip irrigation systems, fish breeding, and agricultural planning. The Israeli companies Netafim, Tahal, Arbel, Fabren Gardens, etc., took part in the forum. The former Israeli Ambassador Arthur Lenk and members of the Azerbaijani Parliament also participated in the forum.⁵⁵

With the collaboration of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs USAID funded a course titled “Irrigation Systems for Intensive Crop Production”. For the first time, twenty-three Azerbaijani businessmen also participated in this kind of organization. The training incorporated both theoretical and practical components, including site visits to farms and greenhouses which showcased the significant progress in Israeli agriculture and the potential for rural Azerbaijan. These courses were very beneficial for the Azerbaijani participants to learn how to use Israeli agricultural technologies.⁵⁶

The visit of Israeli President Shimon Peres to Azerbaijan in 29 June 2009 is also an important strategic factor for expanding and strengthening the cooperation between the areas of security, diplomacy and the economy between the two countries. The underlying factor of the trip was the issue of oil. Israel is interested in importing more from Azerbaijan and the Central Asian

⁵³ Alexander Murinson, “Azerbaijan-Turkey-Israel Relations: The Energy Factor”, *MERIA*, Vol. 12, No. 3, September 2008, p. 56

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ “Azerbaijan: Israeli Companies Demonstrate Advanced Agricultural Technologies”, *The Israeli Export & International Cooperation Institute*, 01 March 2006; (http://www.export.gov.il/Eng/_Articles/Article.asp?CategoryID=399&ArticleID=3059).

⁵⁶ “Azerbaijan Imports Irrigations Innovations from Israel”, *The Israeli Export & International Cooperation Institute*, 26 May 2007; (http://www.export.gov.il/Eng/_Articles/Article.asp?ArticleID=6108&CategoryID=646).

countries. As mentioned before Israel obtains almost 25 percent of its domestic oil consumption from Azerbaijan and it wants to increase this share. But during his visit several agreements were also signed in the field of culture, education, science, agriculture, and ICT cooperation between the governments of Azerbaijan and Israel.⁵⁷

Azerbaijan, which is in conflict with neighboring Armenia, is also interested in buying more Israeli arms after several previous multimillion-dollar weapons deals; hence it seems likely that Israeli-Azerbaijani military co-operation will increase in the immediate future. According to EUROASIA news agency several military agreements were resigned with the leading Israeli defense companies, which accompanied President Peres during his visit to Baku. Israeli Elta Systems, a defense electronics firm, will help Azerbaijan produce a TecSAR satellite system, which can take high quality photos in all weather conditions. Two governments also intended come to agreement for the construction of a plant in Azerbaijan to “manufacture reconnaissance and military pilotless vehicles”.⁵⁸ During his meeting with the Leaders of Azerbaijani Jews, President Peres mentioned that “Israel and Azerbaijan are both countries that must maintain their military strength because we are both under constant threat. At the same time, I am proud that both Israel and Azerbaijan are countries that pursue peace”.⁵⁹

In an interview with Trend news agency, Peres said that Israel supports the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. This appears to be a clear reference to the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute, in which ethnic Armenians continue to occupy territory within Azerbaijani borders. “I know that Azerbaijan has problems around. Basically, the problems stem from your neighbors. Because in politics you cannot choose your neighbors, as in the family you cannot choose your parents. It is a fact of life. Israel is totally for the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. We don’t think that one country can come and annex a part of another land, he said”.⁶⁰

The official visits of Israeli President Shimon Peres as a matter of importance shows the increasingly independent course of Azerbaijan in its foreign policy and its growing geostrategic importance in the region for the world leading countries.

⁵⁷ “An Agreement on Cooperation between the Governments of Azerbaijan and Israel in the Fields of ICT Has Been Signed”, *The Azeri Times*, 03 July 2009; (<http://www.theazeritimes.com/site/news/2141>).

⁵⁸ Shahin Abbasov, “Azerbaijan Mum about Israeli Spy Plane, Satellite Project”, *Euroasianet.org*, 17 August 2009; (<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insightb/articles/eavo81709a.shtml>).

⁵⁹ “Israel’s President Peres Meets with Azerbaijan Jewish Leaders”, *ChabadLubavitch*, 29 June 2009; (<http://lubavitch.com/news/article/2026534/Israels-President-Peres-Meets-With-Azerbaijan-Jewish-Leaders.html>).

⁶⁰ “Azerbaijan is a Special Country I Know I Can Trust in”, *TrendNews*, 25 June 2009; (<http://en.trend.az/news/politics/foreign/1493806.html>).

Conclusion

In the end, coming to the future of the relations between Azerbaijan and Israel, it is quite unclear. Because, as it was mentioned above, Azerbaijan is a member of the OIC (Organization of the Islamic Conference), which was founded in 1969 in response to the defeat of the Arab coalition in the 1967 War (Six Day War). One of main targets of the Organization was to regain the holy land, which was occupied by Israel after gaining its independence in 1947, with the UN Partition Plan (United Nation General Assembly Resolution 181).⁶¹

Today, the Arab World has demanded Israel withdraw from the sacred places according to the United Nation Resolutions 242 and 339 (According to these Resolutions Israel has to withdraw till the 1947 borders).⁶² Azerbaijan also supports this plan in the favor of Arab World. Even in the recent Israel-Lebanon War Azerbaijan was one of the eight OIC states that sent an ultimatum to Israel to stop violent action in Lebanon. Azerbaijan also agreed to send peacekeeping forces to Lebanon.⁶³

Even despite good economic and political cooperation between Azerbaijan and Israel, Azerbaijan also took sides with the Palestinians in the 2008 Palestinian-Israeli war. There was a large demonstration from the opposite side against the Israeli issue in Gaza. The Azerbaijani government decided to send an official delegation to the OIC Parliamentary Assembly dedicated to the crisis in Gaza. Azerbaijani officials took a neutral position though, as it did not want to endanger friendly relation either with Israel or with Muslim countries.⁶⁴

Developing diplomatic affairs with Israel will provoke Iran against Azerbaijan in a period of escalation of Iran-America-Israel relations. That is a great threat for the security of Azerbaijan. Because Iran several times declared that if the US declares war against us, the first target will be the US' allies in the Middle East.⁶⁵ Today the tension between America and Iran is very high, and Israel is one of the big supporters of America on this issue and the first target of Iran. Developing full diplomatic relations with Israel could damage the relations with one of Azerbaijan's most important neighbors. Even the Israeli president's recent visit attracted criticism from the Iranian government. It

⁶¹ "United Nations General Assembly Resolution 181", *MidEastWeb*, 29 November 1947; (<http://www.mideastweb.org/181.htm>).

⁶² Moshe Dann, "Lords of the Land: The War over Israel's Settlements in the Occupied Territories, 1967-2007", *Middle East Quarterly*, Book review, Vol. 16, No. 2, Spring 2009, pp.84-85

⁶³ Fariz Ismailzade, "Azerbaijanis Take Sides in Israeli-Lebanese War", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 3, No. 157, 14 August 2006; ([http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=31974](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=31974)).

⁶⁴ Alman Mir - Ismail, "Azerbaijan, Trapped Between Palestinians and Israel, Takes a Pragmatic Position", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 6, No. 13, 21 January 2009; ([http://www.jamestown.org/program/edm/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=34379&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=27&cHash=2c5440c8de](http://www.jamestown.org/program/edm/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=34379&tx_ttnews[backPid]=27&cHash=2c5440c8de)).

⁶⁵ Jorge Hirsch, "Israel, Iran, and the US: Nuclear War, Here We Come", *Antiwar.com*, 17 October 2005; (<http://www.antiwar.com/orig/hirsch.php?articleid=7649>).

recalled its ambassador from Baku and tried to press the Azerbaijani government to cancel the visit.⁶⁶ Therefore, balancing policy can be good diplomacy so far to follow in this period.

In spite of all this, Azerbaijan has good economic and cultural relations with Israel. Azerbaijan is a tolerant state and is ready to develop good relations with any country, as long as these relations will not damage its security, national interests or international prestige. In an interview with *The Jerusalem Post*, Foreign Minister Elmar Memmedyarov also added that “having full diplomatic relations will happen for sure”.⁶⁷ Despite the absence of diplomatic representation of Azerbaijan in Israel, all regional powers are aware of the strategic partnership between Israel and Azerbaijan. That is why it is important not only to coordinate common foreign political efforts, but also to strengthen economic relations between Azerbaijan and Israel.

⁶⁶ Fariz Ismailzade, “Azerbaijan's Independent Foreign Policy Strengthened by Recent High Profile Meetings”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 6, No. 162, 21 August 2009; (http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=35450).

⁶⁷ Ibid.

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