



Feature Article  
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## Israel's Role in the Second Armenia-Azerbaijan War and Its Implications for the Future

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*For a quarter of a century, Israel and Azerbaijan have maintained deep strategic cooperation that touches on national security issues of the highest importance to both sides. The defense relationship goes far beyond arms sales and technology transfer, including cooperation on the establishment of Azerbaijan's indigenous defense industry. In the 2020 war, Azerbaijan demonstrated an innovative use of Israeli arms and the integration of Turkish and Israeli unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) as well as a novel uses of UAVs. The war set the stage the return of open cooperation between Turkey and Israel and renewal of exchange of ambassadors. Moreover, Israel's cooperation with Azerbaijan has endowed it with "soft power" among ethnic Azerbaijanis in Iran, who form one-third of the Islamic Republic's population.*

The Second Armenia-Azerbaijan War, which took place over 44 days in fall 2020, shed light on the actual military alignments involving the states of the South Caucasus region. While the three South Caucasus states exchange rhetorical niceties with the regional and global powers active in the region and cooperate in various economic and diplomatic organizations, in reality there are clear military alignments that differ greatly from this.

This was aptly illustrated in several ways during the war: Iran was willing to put forces in the war zone to support Armenia, and also both collected and shared with Armenia intelligence on

Azerbaijan's troop movements and allowed its territory to serve as the main conduit of Russian arms to Armenia; Russia resupplied arms and other supplies to Armenia and as Moscow controls Armenia's airspace and air defense, allowed the firing of ballistic missiles on civilian targets in multiple locations in Azerbaijan, including the capital Baku; Turkey's defense cooperation with Azerbaijan developed over the years into a full-fledged military alliance, with Ankara contributing to the emergence of Azerbaijan's highly capable military force. In addition, Azerbaijan's military proficiency during the war revealed the results of the long-term strategic cooperation between Israel and Azerbaijan and, indeed, the

strategic nature of defense cooperation between the two states.<sup>1</sup>

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



*Young Azerbaijanis, November 2020.*

The cooperation between Israel and Azerbaijan in the military sphere extends beyond arms sales. Rather, Israeli security and military cooperation has played a significant role in the building of Azerbaijan's military capabilities and the establishment in Azerbaijan of a home-grown defense industry. Israeli specialists have also engaged in the training of Azerbaijani military experts on the operation of various armaments, the development of organizational methods and formulation of military doctrine. In the 2020 war,

Azerbaijan demonstrated an innovative use of Israeli arms and the integration of Turkish and Israeli unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) as well as a novel use of UAVs, which included carrying out multiple tasks and their integration with other armaments in the battlefield.

Military planners and strategists worldwide continue to study this battlefield integration exhibited in the 2020 Armenia-Azerbaijan war as well as the war in general, which has been viewed as an important case study in modern warfare.

In addition, the success of the Turkish and Israeli armaments and their battlefield integration in the 2020 Armenia-Azerbaijan War has led to increased commercial interest globally in both the Turkish and Israeli defense industries. The war also set the stage for important political developments, including the return of open cooperation between Turkey and Israel and renewal of exchange of ambassadors, announced on August 17, 2022. Moreover, Israel's cooperation with Azerbaijan has endowed

<sup>1</sup> Earlier examinations of this topic appeared in "Israel's Role in the Second Armenia-Azerbaijan War," in Turan Gafarli and Michael Arnold (eds.), *The Karabakh Gambit: Responsibility for the future* Istanbul: TRT World Research Centre, 2021; and in Hebrew אבינעם עידן

וברנדה שפר, "תפקידה של ישראל במלחמת אזרבייג'אן-ארמניה השנייה, הסדרה הגאוסטרטגית, אוניברסיטת 2022 פברואר חיפה, (https://ch-strategy.hevra.haifa.ac.il/index.php/israel-s-role-in-the-second-armenian-azerbaijan-war)

it with “soft power” among ethnic Azerbaijanis in Iran, who form one-third of the Islamic Republic’s population. Many ethnic Azerbaijanis in Iran expressed support for Azerbaijan during the war and thus appreciated Israel’s contribution to Azerbaijan’s war effort.<sup>2</sup>

### Major Milestones in Azerbaijan-Israel Relations

The State of Israel was one of the first countries to recognize Azerbaijan’s independence, which it did on December 25, 1991. Formal diplomatic relations were established on April 7, 1992, and Israel established a permanent embassy in Baku on August 29, 1993. Azerbaijan did not reciprocate by opening an embassy in Israel, out of concern of losing support from the Arab and Muslim bloc in UN resolutions related to the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. However, in the wake of the 2020 Armenia-Azerbaijan War it is likely that Azerbaijan will open a full embassy in Israel. The restoration of Azerbaijani control over its territories in the 2020 war has rendered Baku less dependent on the Arab bloc at the United Nations. In addition, the establishment of diplomatic relations between Israel and several Arab and Muslim-majority states as part of the Abraham Accord process that began in 2020, and their subsequent

opening of embassies has clearly lowered the potential ramifications for Baku in opening an embassy in Israel. In July 2021, Azerbaijan opened tourism and trade missions in Israel. The Azerbaijani representatives at these missions have Azerbaijani diplomatic passports. Further diplomatic openings between Azerbaijan and Israel are likely in near future.

In the mid-1990s, cooperation between Israel and the Republic of Azerbaijan deepened, with the two countries forging deep strategic ties and maintaining open high-level contacts. Former Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev met with several Israeli Prime Ministers including Yitzhak Rabin, Benjamin Netanyahu (including a short working visit to Baku in August 1997), and Ehud Barak. Azerbaijan’s current President Ilham Aliyev has held frequent meetings with Israeli leaders, including hosting President Shimon Peres for a State visit and hosting Prime Minister Netanyahu in December 2016. Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon made an open visit to Azerbaijan in 2014,<sup>3</sup> and in September 2017, Azerbaijani Minister of Defense Zakir Hasanov openly reciprocated.<sup>4</sup> Further indications of the closeness of relations between Azerbaijan and Israel include the Israel-Azerbaijan Inter-Ministerial Commission’s first meeting in Jerusalem on May 14, 2018, the

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<sup>2</sup> For more on the political activity of ethnic Azerbaijanis in Iran, including their mobilization in favor of Azerbaijan during the 2020 Armenia-Azerbaijan War, see Brenda Shaffer, *Iran is more than Persia: Ethnic Politics in Iran*, Washington, DC: Foundation for Defense of Democracy, April 2021. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2021/04/28/iran-is-more-than-persia/>)

<sup>3</sup> “Ya’alon Makes Surprise Visit to Azerbaijan,” *Haaretz*, September 10, 2014. (<https://www.haaretz.com/moshe-yaalon-makes-surprise-visit-to-azerbaijan-1.5264061>)

<sup>4</sup> “Azerbaijan’s Defense Minister Visits Israel, as Bilateral Ties Grow Stronger,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, September 25, 2017. (<https://jamestown.org/program/azerbaijans-defense-minister-visits-israel-as-bilateral-ties-grow-stronger/>)

day that the United States opened its embassy in Jerusalem. Despite pressure from many Muslim-majority countries for Azerbaijan to cancel the meeting in Jerusalem in light of the U.S. decision, the Azerbaijani delegation held the meeting as planned. The Commission held its second meeting in April 2021.<sup>5</sup>

In the economic sphere, Israel has been among Azerbaijan's top five trade partners for most of the post-Soviet period. Azerbaijan is Israel's top oil supplier, delivering both crude and refined products, and providing 40 percent of Israel's annual oil consumption in 2022. Israel purchases approximately 10 percent of Azerbaijan's oil exports. The oil trade between Azerbaijan and Israel takes place via direct sales from Azerbaijan's state-owned company SOCAR to Israeli refineries, but also indirectly via European oil traders. As a result, bilateral trade data does not fully reflect the volume of oil trade between Azerbaijan and Israel. Azerbaijan supplies oil to Israel via the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline and then by regular tanker sailings from the Turkish port at Ceyhan to the refineries in Haifa and Ashdod. These oil supplies have never been disrupted, including in periods of very rocky relations between Israel and Turkey. In 2012-13, A SOCAR subsidiary, the Caspian Drilling Company, undertook oil and natural gas exploration in Israel's offshore Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) near the

Israeli city of Ashdod. This was SOCAR's first exploration project outside of the Caspian Sea basin. The exploration activity ultimately yielded only small oil discoveries, which were not commercially viable.

In addition, Azerbaijan's national airline, AZAL has had regular flights to Tel Aviv since 1993. When most foreign carriers stopped flights to Israel during the 2014 Operation Protective Edge, AZAL was one of the few carriers that continued to fly to Israel.

Azerbaijan has been home to a Jewish community for over 2,500 years. Today, most of the members of this community live in Baku and the northern region of Quba. This community numbers approximately 30,000,<sup>6</sup> which makes the Jewish community in Azerbaijan the largest in the Muslim world today. The Jewish community of Azerbaijan is comprised of several groups, including Mountain Jews (a group of Jews hailing mainly from Azerbaijan and Russia's north Caucasus), Georgian Jews, and Ashkenazi Jews. There has been no history of anti-Semitism in Azerbaijan. In addition, Jews that escaped the Nazi conquests of other parts of the USSR found refuge in Azerbaijan during the Holocaust. Azerbaijani Jews enjoy safety and freedom of worship and culture. As part of the general state policy toward minorities that allows all groups to operate schools in their native languages in Azerbaijan,

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<sup>5</sup> "Azərbaycan-İsrail iqtisadi əməkdaşlığı müzakirə edilib," Ministry of Economy, Republic of Azerbaijan, April 29, 2021. (<https://www.economy.gov.az/article/azerbaycan-i-srail-iqtisadi-emekdashligi-muzakire-edilib/31644>)

<sup>6</sup> Based on data collected by the National Coalition Supporting Eurasian Jewry. This organization is the main international organization that researches the Jews of Eurasia and supports these communities.

Jews can operate schools that teach Jewish culture and Hebrew. President Aliyev visits Jewish community institutions in Quba annually and issues regular greetings on Jewish holidays and an annual solidarity statement on Holocaust Remembrance Day.

In addition, emigres from Azerbaijan to Israel play an important role in the commercial and cultural exchanges between Israel and Azerbaijan. Every summer, during the Jewish holiday of Tisha B'Av, the community of Mountain Jews in Azerbaijan and its diaspora (mostly from Israel, Russia and the United States) gather together in the Jewish town of Qirmizi Qesebe in the Quba region of northern Azerbaijan to rekindle communal ties and celebrate their culture. The event is used to encourage marriages between young adult Mountain Jews and thus helps to ensure continuity of the community and its unique culture. Furthermore, Azerbaijani state universities and schools study the history of the Holocaust as part of their regular curricula. The Azerbaijan State University of Foreign Languages has a department of Israel Studies and gives degrees that include study of the Hebrew language.

Since the restoration of Azerbaijan's independence in 1991, leading American Jewish organizations have enthusiastically embraced relations with the Republic of Azerbaijan and many of these groups express support for strong relations between Washington and Baku, as well as

trilateral cooperation with Israel. The Republic of Azerbaijan's policies have made it easy for American Jewish organizations to embrace the cause of Azerbaijan. Moreover, the fact that Azerbaijan is a Muslim-majority state with no history of anti-Semitism that celebrates the existence of its Jewish and Christian communities, its geographic location, the fact that it shares an ethnic Azerbaijani population with Iran, its consequent strategic importance for Middle East security, and Baku's friendly policies toward Israel have all facilitated American Jewish support for Azerbaijan.

### **Iran's reaction to Azerbaijan-Israel ties**

Some analysts have explained Iran's hostility toward the Republic of Azerbaijan as a response to Baku's close ties with Israel, depicting Iran as being on the defensive in light of the cooperation between Israel and Azerbaijan. The timeline of this claim is simply not correct. Strategic cooperation between Azerbaijan and Israel commenced in 1995-1996. In contrast, Tehran has acted against Azerbaijan from the reestablishment of independence in 1991 – that is to say, long before Baku formed close links with Israel.

Tehran's strategic disposition toward Azerbaijan is primarily rooted in its concern that a strong and prosperous Republic of Azerbaijan could rouse ethno-nationalism among Iran's own Azerbaijani community, which comprises close to a third of the population of Iran.<sup>7</sup> Thus, it is

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<sup>7</sup> Shaffer, *Iran is more than Persia: Ethnic Politics in the Islamic Republic*, p. 37; Brenda Shaffer, *Borders and Brethren: Iran and the Challenge of Azerbaijani Identity*,

Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002; Brenda Shaffer, "The Islamic Republic of Iran: is it really?", in Brenda Shaffer,

unsurprising that Tehran lent support to Armenia in its conflict with Azerbaijan in hopes of keeping Baku tied down.

Iran served as the main conduit of arms and supplies to Armenia during both the first Armenia-Azerbaijan War in 1992-94 and the Second Armenia-Azerbaijan War in 2020.<sup>8</sup> Tehran views Jewish and Israeli institutions located in Azerbaijan as potential targets during periods when it looks to conduct violent operations against Israel. In 2012, for instance, Tehran and its proxies in Azerbaijan plotted to assassinate the Israeli Ambassador in Baku (along with U.S. Ambassador to Azerbaijan, Matthew J. Bryza).<sup>9</sup> In addition, throughout the 2010s, Iran planned several attacks on Jewish communal institutions in Azerbaijan.<sup>10</sup> The Azerbaijani security services successfully foiled these attempts, likely in cooperation with U.S. and Israeli intelligence services.

### The Armenian factor

Due to the significance of the strategic component in Israel's relations with Azerbaijan, the

Republic of Armenia and Armenian diaspora groups have targeted Israel in campaigns aimed at undermining the cooperation between Israel and the Republic of Azerbaijan. Yerevan intensified its effort to drive a wedge in Israel's relations with Azerbaijan following its strategic setback in the 2016 April "Four-Day War." This fighting marked the first time since the 1994 ceasefire that Azerbaijan succeeded in regaining control of some of its territories that had been occupied by Armenia.

The Armenian diaspora community in Israel has been active in campaigns against Israel's cooperation with Azerbaijan, including holding demonstrations at Israel's Knesset (parliament). Approximately four thousand Armenians reside in Israel, half of whom live in the Armenian Quarter in Jerusalem's old city. During the 2020 war, pro-Armenia activists in Israel submitted a petition to Israel's High Court of Justice to ban Israel's arms sales to Azerbaijan, claiming that Azerbaijan was using the weapons to commit

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ed., *Limits of Culture*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan stated that "we will never forget that Iran was the path of life for Armenia in the early 90s," referring to Iran's support for Armenia during the war period. "Armenia will never be involved in any anti-Iran conspiracy – Nikol Pashinyan" Armenpress, October 3, 2021. (<https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1064669.html>)

<sup>9</sup> "דיווח בארבייג'ן: סוכלה התנקשות בשגריר ישראל" [Report in Azerbaijan: An assassination attempt on the Israeli ambassador was foiled] *Ynet*, January 25, 2021. (<https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4180360,00.html>); "Azerbaijan arrests 22 suspects in

alleged Iran spy plot," BBC, March 14, 2021.

(<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17368576>); "Azerbaijan Says it Thwarted an Iranian Plot to Kill an Israeli Ambassador," *The Atlantic*, January 27, 2012. (<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/01/azerbaijan-says-it-thwarted-an-iranian-plot-to-kill-an-israeli-ambassador/252111/>)

<sup>10</sup> "ארבייג'אן סיכלה פיגוע נגד ישראלים בתגובה על" [Azerbaijan thwarted an attack against Israelis in response to the assassination of the Iranian scientists], *Haaretz*, January 24, 2012. (<https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/1.1624811>)

war crimes. The Israel High Court of Justice rejected the petition citing lack of evidence.<sup>11</sup>

Decades after the establishment of diplomatic relations, Armenia opened an embassy in Israel on September 17, 2020 and dispatched an ambassador.<sup>12</sup> When less than a fortnight later, it became clear that Yerevan's expectations of Israel did not materialize – its diplomatic gestures did not prevent Israel's cooperation from Azerbaijan from developing – Yerevan withdrew its ambassador from Israel on October 1, 2020. Armenia dispatched a new ambassador to Israel only in April 2022.

Yerevan had calculated that with the establishment of an embassy in Tel Aviv and warmer rhetoric, it could dissuade Israel from cooperating with Azerbaijan. An example of this Armenian assessment is found in August 2020, when an Armenian government official remarked that through Yerevan's planned opening of an embassy and other steps, the country had succeeded in pivoting Israel toward Armenia and away from Azerbaijan<sup>13</sup>, dramatically changing the strategic situation in the South Caucasus.

Armenia's overtures did not succeed in creating any concrete change in the strategic cooperation between Israel and Azerbaijan. Support for the cooperation between Azerbaijan and Israel runs

deep among the Israeli security leadership and across most of the Israeli political spectrum. Moreover, Armenia's deep security ties with Iran preclude Israel from forging security ties with Armenia. As noted above, Iran served as the main conduit of Russian arms and other supplies to Armenia during the 2020 Azerbaijan-Armenia War: Russian ships arrived at Iran's Caspian port of Anzali and brought Russian arms and other supplies by truck into Armenia, and even into the battle zone itself. Russian supply flights to Armenia also transited Iran's airspace.

### Iran in the Battlefield

In contrast to Tehran's typical *modus operandi* of working through proxy forces, Iran's forces directly stepped onto the battlefield during the 2020 Azerbaijan-Armenia War in attempt to prevent or at least slow down Baku's advance. When Azerbaijan's forces reached the province of Zangilan, which borders Iran, and were engaged in serious battles with Armenian troops, Iranian forces crossed the border into Azerbaijan on October 17, 2020 and placed large concrete blocks on the road in a section in Jabrayil region close to Zangilan, cutting the Azerbaijani forces deployed in Zangilan from supplies and reinforcements.<sup>14</sup> Iranian forces stayed in Azerbaijani territory for three days, claiming they were protecting the

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<sup>11</sup> "High Court rejects ban on arms sales to Azerbaijan as lacking evidence," *Jerusalem Post*, October 13, 2020.

<sup>12</sup> "Armenian Embassy officially inaugurated in Tel Aviv," *Armenpress*, September 18, 2020. <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1028117/>

<sup>13</sup> Author's conversation with an Armenian official, August 2020.

<sup>14</sup> "How Iran invaded Azerbaijan during 44-Day War in 2020," *Contreras Report YouTube*, October 10, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iuzJbnl12xw>

Khudafarin hydropower plant, which they had built in cooperation with the Armenian occupation forces. Azerbaijani commanders attempted to convince the Iranian forces to leave, but they refused. The Azerbaijani government even brought the Iranian military attaché in from Baku to the border area to where the Iranian troops were situated to discuss their withdrawal. Only when Baku threatened to make public Iran's battlefield intervention did the Iranian forces agree to leave and allow the removal of the concrete blocks.

It is likely that the Iranian forces feared publication of their intervention, since this knowledge would further inflame ethnic Azerbaijanis in Iran against the regime. The Iranian roadblock succeeded in cutting the Azerbaijani forces from each other, which delayed the arrival of reinforcements and supplies to its forces engaged in battle in Zangilan. This required the Azerbaijani military to use a different, longer road to join their troops in Zangilan. The resulting delay allowed the Armenians to regroup and resupply,

and thus the Iranian intervention led to additional Azerbaijani casualties.

In addition, Iranian forces also crossed into Nakhchivan, Azerbaijan's exclave that borders Iran, several times during the war.<sup>15</sup> Iran also shared with Armenia information on Azerbaijani troop movements in the provinces that border Iran, which they could observe and also pickup communications of the Azerbaijani troops. Tehran also at times during the war actively blocked communications of Azerbaijani troops.<sup>16</sup>

Iran was likely also involved in the development of Armenia's tunnel warfare capacity. Nearly two years before the start of the 2020 Armenia-Azerbaijan War, Armenia assumed a new strategic doctrine of "new wars for new territories,"<sup>17</sup> under which Armenia would open new fronts with Azerbaijan in order to deter Baku from attempting to retake its occupied territories, which were perceived as vulnerable following the 2016 war between Azerbaijan and Armenia. The new doctrine involved adopting a more dynamic military strategy: using offensive actions as part of its defense, and not remaining in static positions such

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<sup>15</sup> Author's interviews, October 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Author's interviews, September 2021; "How Iran invaded Azerbaijan during 44-Day War in 2020," Contreas Report YouTube, October 10, 2021. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iuzlbnl12xw>); "Иран вторгся в Азербайджан: сенсационные подробности 44-дневной войны," [Iran invaded Azerbaijan: sensational details of the 44-day war] *Caliber*, October 9, 2021. (<https://caliber.az/ru/post/28990/>)

<sup>17</sup>"We Do the Opposite – New War for New Territories: Minister Tonoyan's Tough Statement," Lragir, March 30, 2019. (<https://www.lragir.am/en/2019/03/30/71511>); "New Territories In the Event of New War," Says

Defense Minister," Asbarez, April 1, 2019. (<https://asbarez.com/178701/new-territories-in-the-event-of-new-war-says-defense-minister>); Eduard Abrahamyan, "Rationalizing the Tonoyan Doctrine: Armenia's Active Deterrence Strategy," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, May 2, 2019. (<https://jamestown.org/program/rationalizing-the-tonoyan-doctrine-armenias-active-deterrence-strategy/>)



as trenches, but moving troops and conducting surprise attacks on Azerbaijani forces. As part of the new Armenian doctrine, Yerevan employed tunnel warfare, and built tunnels in the territories it occupied, including in Zangilan at the border with Iran and in border areas with Azerbaijan such as Tovuz. There are indications that Armenia gained tunnel expertise from Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). Tunnel warfare is used extensively by Iranian proxies Hizballah and Hamas. The tunnels in the Tovuz region contributed greatly to Armenia's ability to launch a surprise attack on Azerbaijan on July 12, 2020.

### **The Russian Response to Israeli-Azerbaijan Cooperation**

Russia could have posed a threat to the security cooperation between Azerbaijan and Israel, as it did to the cooperation between Georgia and Israel in advance of the 2008 Georgia-Russia War. Back then, Moscow had forced Israel to halt arms sales and remove military advisors from Georgia in the run-up to its further invasion of Georgian territory in 2008. In contrast to the Georgian case, however, Azerbaijan did not acquire Israeli weapons for use against Russia, perhaps explaining Moscow's tolerance of these sales to Baku. However, Israeli supplies gave Azerbaijan a strategic edge over Armenia, Russia's ally in the region. Thus, Russia could have attempted to limit Israel's arms sales to Azerbaijan, and use levers, such as it has available in Syria, to coerce Israel.

Azerbaijan's triumph was also a knockout victory for Western arms technology in the clash between Russian produced systems and those of

NATO member Turkey and U.S. ally Israel. Clearly, this was not positive for Russia and hurt its ability to market its armaments, even prior to its 2022 war with Ukraine.

### **Azerbaijan- Israel Strategic and Military Cooperation**

The defense relationship between Azerbaijan and Israel goes far beyond arms sales and technology transfer. The strong government-to-government component enables the successful integration of strategy, threat assessment, intelligence cooperation, and military management. Azerbaijan and Israel are strategic partners, not mere commercial partners. The relationship is viewed by the two countries as part of a wider strategic partnership based on shared interests and policy views.

Some commentators assume that the arms trade is based solely on commercial factors, often crudely represented as "arms for oil" trade. However, this is inaccurate. For a quarter of a century, Israel and Azerbaijan have maintained deep strategic cooperation that touches on national security issues of the highest importance to both sides. This cooperation comprises intelligence, anti-terrorism cooperation, and non-military cooperation in the fields of education, science and economy. A major milestone in defense cooperation between the two sides took place in February 2012, when the two countries signed an arms supply agreement valued at \$1.6 billion, which included Israeli UAVs, anti-aircraft and missile

air defense systems.<sup>18</sup> Another major landmark came during then-Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's visit to Azerbaijan in December 2016. During Netanyahu's visit, President Aliyev announced that the two countries had signed a new major arms agreement worth approximately \$5 billion.

The contribution of Israeli arms and technology to Azerbaijan's military prowess was evident already during the April 2016 Four-Day War. During this short clash between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Israeli weapons including Harop "suicide" drones for the first time played an important role in a battle zone in the Caucasus.

One of the most important outcomes of Israel-Azerbaijan cooperation has been the development of an indigenous defense industry in Azerbaijan. The local defense industry helped Azerbaijani forces gain expertise in the use of these weapon systems and the country's indigenous production capacity means that Azerbaijan is not dependent on imports for resupplies of some of its equipment during wartime. Among the domestic defense industries established in Azerbaijan in cooperation with Israel has been the

manufacture of UAVs with Azerbaijan's Azad Systems producing UAVs based on technology first developed by Israel's Aeronautics Company.

### Wartime Cooperation during the 2020 War

The 2020 Armenia-Azerbaijan War had two stages. Stage one began on July 12, with Armenian attacks in the border area of the Azerbaijani region of Tovuz that sought to disrupt the security of the East-West energy and transit corridor that passes through the area.<sup>19</sup> Israeli arms, especially Harop drones, played an important role at this stage in repulsing the Armenian incursions.<sup>20</sup> During the next stage of the war, which began on September 27, Israeli arms along with Azerbaijani products produced with Israeli technology played a key role in the fighting. In an April 2021 interview for an Israeli newspaper, Azerbaijan's Minister of Foreign Affairs Jeyhun Bayramov remarked: "The skillful use of high-tech and high-precision weapons, including those made in Israel, in particular, unmanned aerial vehicles, by the Azerbaijani Armed Forces played an exceptional role in Azerbaijan's victory."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> "ישראל חתמה עם אזרבייג'אן עסקת נשק בהיקף "נרחב" [Israel signed a large-scale arms deal with Azerbaijan] *Haaretz*, February 26, 2012.

(<https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/1.1651037>)

<sup>19</sup> Brenda Shaffer, "Energy in Conflict: The Case of the 2020 Armenia-Azerbaijan War," *CTX Journal*, April 2022. ([https://nps.edu/documents/110773463/135759179/Energy+in+Conflict-The+case+of+the+2020+Armenia-](https://nps.edu/documents/110773463/135759179/Energy+in+Conflict-The+case+of+the+2020+Armenia-Azerbaijan+War.pdf/b5dbddc9-ab1f-8ff1-df52-ab0cec38b5ec?t=1652135996557)

[Azerbaijan+War.pdf/b5dbddc9-ab1f-8ff1-df52-ab0cec38b5ec?t=1652135996557](https://nps.edu/documents/110773463/135759179/Energy+in+Conflict-The+case+of+the+2020+Armenia-Azerbaijan+War.pdf/b5dbddc9-ab1f-8ff1-df52-ab0cec38b5ec?t=1652135996557))

<sup>20</sup> "דיווחים: מטוסים ללא טייס וטילים ישראלים בקרבות " בין אזרבייג'אן וארמניה [Reports: drones and Israeli missiles in the battles between Azerbaijan and Armenia] *Mako*, July 16, 2020. (<https://www.mako.co.il/pzm-military/Article-a42533385175371027.htm>)

<sup>21</sup> "Israeli-made weapons played an exceptional role in Azerbaijan's victory in Second Karabakh War—MFA,"

One of the major factors behind Azerbaijan's battlefield success was the integration of Israeli and Turkish weapons systems. For instance, rather than using drones for single missions such as intelligence gathering or single target strikes, a common tactic, Azerbaijani forces used UAVs to perform multiple missions during a single flight. Moreover, the UAVs were integrated into the larger battle plan.<sup>22</sup> A major factor in Azerbaijan's success was its ability to integrate its various weapons systems. For example, through sophisticated and innovative use of UAV technology, Azerbaijan was able to incapacitate Armenia's Russian-supplied S-300 air defense system. Some of the cases of innovative weapon and technology uses illustrate that extensive Azerbaijani pre-planning took place, and this was likely in cooperation and study involving Turkish and Israeli military experts.

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

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*Azernews*, April 5, 2021.

(<https://www.azernews.az/karabakh/177678.html>)

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Ragip Soyly, "Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict: How Baku destroyed Russian S-300s with Israeli suicide drones," *Middle East Eye*, March 3, 2021.

(<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/azerbaijan-armenia-russia-israel-suicide-drones-destroy>).

One of the most significant uses of Israeli weapons systems during the war occurred during its final days. As Armenia's losses were mounting, Armenia launched Iskandar-M missiles at targets in Azerbaijan outside the battle zone, including targeting Baku. Prior to this, Armenia had fired Iskandar-E missiles, which have a shorter range and were known to be part of Armenia's arsenal, at both military and civilian targets in Azerbaijan. It was not known that Moscow had supplied the M version, which, due to its longer range, represents a violation of the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) arms control pact, to which Russia is a party. It is plausible that Russian units in Armenia or in Russian territory fired the Iskandar-M missiles. The Iskandar-M missiles fired at Baku were intercepted by the Israeli made Barak-8 air defense system.<sup>23</sup> The deployment of the air defense system is indicative of the high level of Israeli-Azerbaijani cooperation, since it requires extensive cooperation in training the Azerbaijani military to use the system.

American officials took note of the deep Azerbaijani-Israel military cooperation during the war and even attempted to disrupt it during the war. This occurred despite the fact that Israel was helping Azerbaijan restore its territorial integrity and is thus in principle no different than

<sup>23</sup> Ragip Soyly, "Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict: Israeli defense system shot down Russian missile Yerevan fired at Baku," *Middle East Eye*, March 1, 2021.

(<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/azerbaijan-armenia-israel-russia-missile-fired-shot-down>)

Ukraine's struggle today, and that Baku was battling Russia's chief proxy in the region. As Hudson Institute scholar Dr. Michael Doran wrote:

A senior official in the Israeli government, who had direct knowledge of the events in question, told me that during the fighting, a very senior White House official called to request that the Israelis put the brakes on the resupply of the Azerbaijani military. Eager to broker a ceasefire, that American official apparently calculated that because the Azerbaijanis held the upper hand on the battlefield, they were reluctant to accept a ceasefire. If, however, Israel would slow or stop the flow of weapons shipments, then Baku's calculus might change. The Israeli official politely refused the request, explaining to the American that allies don't abandon allies in the middle of a war. The White House official did not push the issue again.<sup>24</sup>

### **Political Results of the Azerbaijan-Israel Cooperation in the War**

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

### **Popular Support for Israel in Azerbaijan**

Israel has generally enjoyed a positive position among the Azerbaijani public. The full integration of Azerbaijan's Jewish community in the country's public life, as well as the ties between emigrés to Israel and their former neighbors and friends in Azerbaijan, have contributed to this popular attitude in Azerbaijan. The strategic cooperation between Azerbaijan and Israel exhibited in the 2020 war has only served to increase Israel's popularity among Azerbaijanis.

During the war and in the public celebrations following its end of the war, numerous public displays of Israeli flags were observed, often together with Turkish, Pakistani, and Azerbaijani flags. Positive public sentiments toward Israel were boosted by visits following the war by delegations of Israeli ophthalmological surgeons to treat wounded Azerbaijani soldiers.<sup>25</sup> In several procedures, Israeli doctors transplanted eyes from Israeli organ donors and restored sight to several injured Azerbaijani soldiers, generating widespread public appreciation. Azerbaijani soldiers also underwent medical procedures in Israel.

### **Israel's Soft Power in Iran**

The second political impact is the boosting of Israel's soft power in Iran. Israel's cooperation with and support of Azerbaijan in the war generated

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<sup>24</sup> Michael Doran, "Azerbaijan in the Struggle for Eurasia," *Baku Dialogues*, January 27, 2022. (<https://bakudialogues.ada.edu.az/articles/azerbaijan-in-the-struggle-for-eurasia-27-01-2022>)

<sup>25</sup> "Azerbaijani war veteran receives prosthetic eye brought from Israel," *Azerbaijan24*, March 2, 2021. (<https://www.azerbaycan24.com/en/azerbajjani-war-veteran-receives-prosthetic-eye-brought-from-israel/>)

significant goodwill toward Israel among ethnic Azerbaijanis in Iran. As most of Iran's ethnic Azerbaijanis live in provinces that border the Republic of Azerbaijan, including the newly liberated territories, many went to the border area (along the Araz River) and witnessed the war in real time, cheering on Azerbaijan's troops.

During the war, some Azerbaijanis in Iran held demonstrations against Tehran's support for Armenia, resulting in dozens of arrests. Many of the Azerbaijanis in Iran who identified with their co-ethnics in the Republic of Azerbaijan subsequently formed positive attitudes toward Israel because of its support for Baku during the war. Despite Tehran's fervent anti-Israel policies, many ethnic Azerbaijanis were not afraid to publicly express their positive attitudes toward Israel and gratitude for Israel's support of Azerbaijan in the war and Israel's subsequent medical treatment of injured soldiers. For example, in March 2021 dozens of ethnic Azerbaijanis called into the Chicago based Gunaz TV shows, which are conducted in the Azerbaijani language, to express their gratitude to Israel for its support of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Many of these callers openly condemned Iran's anti-Israel and pro-Armenia policies.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> See "Güney Azərbaycan Xalqı Əksəriyyəti İsrail Tərəfdarıdır," [Majority of South Azerbaijanis are pro-Israel] Gunaz.TV, March 24, 2021. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S5gtYsV9FgM>) ; "Most Iranian people are pro-Israel, expatriate says," Ynet, March 22, 2021. (<https://www.ynetnews.com/magazine/article/r10h00SUEd>).

### The Israel-Azerbaijan-Turkey Triangle

A third political impact of Israeli-Azerbaijani cooperation during the 2020 Armenia—Azerbaijan War concerns Azerbaijan's long-held desire for the return of cooperative relations between two of its closest allies - Turkey and Israel. Following the 2020 war, in which Turkey and Israel both played a critical role in Azerbaijan's success, Baku intensified its push to seek the re-establishment of constructive ties between the two countries. As part of these efforts, in April 2021 President Ilham Aliyev offered to host a summit between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and then-Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu,<sup>27</sup> and continued to actively support the return of cooperative relations between Turkey and Israel. These efforts contributed to the renormalization of diplomatic relations and return of exchange of ambassadors, announced on 17 August 2022.

The cooperation between Turkey and Israel in support of Azerbaijan contributed to the return of constructive political relations and security cooperation between Turkey and Israel. In 2022, several high-level political visits by Israeli officials to Turkey, as well as by Turkish officials to Israel took place. This included the visit of Israel's President Isaac Herzog to Ankara in March 2022,

<sup>27</sup> "Mutual Friends: Azerbaijan Seeks to Promote Reconciliation Between Israel and Türkiye," *Caspian Policy Center*, December 24, 2020. (<https://www.caspianpolicy.org/mutual-friends-azerbaijan-seeks-to-promote-reconciliation-between-israel-and-türkiye/>)

Turkish foreign minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu's visit to Israel in May 2022, and Israeli Foreign Minister and acting Prime Minister Yair Lapid's visit to Turkey in June 2022. Turkey and Israel have also openly reported that they cooperated during 2022 to thwart Iranian terrorist attacks that targeted Israelis and Jews in Turkey and other countries.

Azerbaijan's successful battlefield integration of Turkish and Israeli UAVs during the war likely entailed direct communication between Turkish and Israeli specialists. Turkey also allowed Israel to fly supplies through its airspace to Azerbaijan during the war.

Moreover, common interests between Turkey, Israel and Azerbaijan have created increased trilateral cooperation between the three countries. New attempts to promote the establishment of Israeli natural gas exports to Turkey or via Turkey to Europe have emerged. Furthermore, Israeli companies are playing a significant role in the post-war economic and infrastructure development of Azerbaijan's liberated territories, providing Israel with opportunities for further cooperation and interaction with regional powers, including Turkey.

## Conclusions

The 2020 Armenia-Azerbaijan War was the first major inter-state war of the twentieth first

century. It was a clash not only between Armenia and Azerbaijan, but also between Russian produced weapons and its military doctrine, one the one hand, and those of U.S. allies – Turkey and Israel, on the other hand. The war was a knockout to the Russian arms industry, and it should have been an indicator that Russia would underperform in Ukraine, as in fact turned out to be the case.

The war also illustrated the actual alignments in operation in the region – Armenia, Iran and Russia, on one hand, versus Azerbaijan, Turkey and Israel, on the other. Academics and policy makers often describe Azerbaijan's relationship with Israel as being "surprisingly close" in light of Azerbaijan being a Muslim-majority state and even a Shi'a-majority state. However, this is only surprising if the supposition is that strategic alliances are based on common culture or religion. But, in fact, there is no evidence that common culture or religion is a factor in forging alliances.<sup>28</sup> In the greater Caucasus region, the opposite is true: Shi'a Iran is an ally of Christian Armenia,<sup>29</sup> despite Armenia's expulsion of close to a million Azerbaijani Shi'a Muslims from their homes; Russia and Georgia are in conflict, despite sharing an Orthodox Christian faith.<sup>30</sup> Israel and Azerbaijan have built an alliance based on common interests, facing common threats and common approaches to many critical issues. This alliance concerns each state's core national interests

<sup>28</sup> On the question of the role of culture in foreign policy and alliances, see Shaffer, *Limits of Culture*.

<sup>29</sup> Shaffer, "The Islamic Republic of Iran: is it really," in Shaffer ed., *Limits of Culture*.

<sup>30</sup> Svante E. Cornell, "Religion as a Factor in Caucasian Conflicts," *Civil Wars*, vol. 1 no. 3, 1998.

(<https://silkroadstudies.org/publications/joint-center-publications/item/13458>)

and is buttressed by three decades of cooperation following the restoration of Azerbaijan's independence in 1991. This cooperation had a significant impact on the outcome of the Second Armenia-Azerbaijan War and is expected to grow in its wake.

Moreover, it is an underappreciated fact that Azerbaijan's close ties with Israel have helped pave the way for other Muslim-majority countries to forge open relations with Israel. Azerbaijan and Israel established diplomatic ties and open cooperation decades before the signing of the Abraham Accords, which saw the normalization of relations between Israel and several of its Arab neighbors with strong support of the United States. Over three decades, the ties between Israel and Azerbaijan (as well as Central Asian states) have demonstrated that a Muslim-majority state can have warm relations with Israel, with no significant public or regional backlash. Throughout this period, Azerbaijan never hesitated to display open and warm cooperation with Israel.

An often-repeated misconception related to Israel-Azerbaijan relations is that Iran's adverse approach to Azerbaijan was formed in response to Baku's close ties with Israel. As pointed out in this essay, this is simply incorrect: Tehran was hostile to Azerbaijan from day one of its independence and consequently supported Armenia in its first war with Azerbaijan in 1992-1994.

Azerbaijan and Israel forged close cooperation only subsequently, beginning in 1995-1996. It is critically important to grasp the timeline in order to correctly understand the motivations of Tehran's policies toward Azerbaijan. Iranian officials were open and explicit in the early 1990s that Tehran's adversarial policy toward Baku was based on domestic security considerations due to concerns that an independent and prosperous Republic of Azerbaijan could be a source of attraction and ethnic awakening of Iran's own ethnic Azerbaijanis. Mahmoud Va'ezī – who served as Deputy Foreign Minister of Iran responsible for the former Soviet region in the early 1990s – stated Iran's approach the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict clearly: "Iran was in the neighborhood of the environment of the conflict. Karabakh is situated only 40 km distance from its borders. At that time, this possibility raised that the boundaries of conflict extended to beyond Karabakh. Since [then] Iran's consideration was based on security perceptions... Iran could not be indifferent to the developments occurring along its borders, security changes of the borders and their impact on Iran's internal developments".<sup>31</sup>

In the future, Israel and Azerbaijan are likely to increase their cooperation in the field of air defense. During the Second Armenia-Azerbaijan War, several of Armenia's attacks and attempted attacks illustrated that Azerbaijan could benefit from more extensive air defense. During the war, Armenia launched several missile attacks on

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<sup>31</sup> Mahmoud Va'ezī, "Mediation in the Karabakh Dispute," Center for Strategic Research, Tehran, January 2008.

civilian targets, including against the civilian populations in the cities of Ganja and Barda, both located far outside what was then the battle zone. In addition, Armenia launched attacks on the strategic energy infrastructure in Azerbaijan and attempted to “weaponize” infrastructure such as the Mingachevir hydropower dam.<sup>32</sup> Successful attacks on this dam could neutralize Azerbaijan’s main source of electricity and also cause massive destruction across large swaths of its territory, as well as result in extensive loss of life.

Aware of the threats from missiles and rockets, Baku is thus likely to look to expand its air defense capacity. Israel is likely to be the supplier or partner in building improved air defense in

Azerbaijan. As demonstrated in recent years, Israeli has a proven capacity to provide effective air defense against some of the most complex threats. This increases in importance when it is understood that air launched threats, including targeting the civilian population and energy infrastructure, are likely to increase and be a major feature of future wars in the South Caucasus and beyond.

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<sup>32</sup> Shaffer, “Energy in Conflict: the Case of the 2020 Armenia-Azerbaijan War.”