

# The Turkey-Azerbaijan-Israel Axis: Pragmatic as Ever

**Gayane Novikova**

The ties and activity within the Turkey-Israel-Azerbaijan triad are motivated by mutual national and strategic interests and/or by coinciding political reasoning. The broader Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean constitute a complex geopolitical area saturated by a diversity of actors. Even though the preservation of fragile balance between them can become problematic, these states are steadily moving toward closer cooperation with each other.

## Who Is Who Inside The “Troika”?

The complicated Turkish-Israeli relationships should be viewed through the prism of global and regional processes. New opportunities for both nations opened up with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In addition to economic gains, Turkey and Israel have also been seeking to increase their political influence in this geopolitical area. In this region their strategic interests were neither competing nor conflicting. Turkey has in particular looked to expand its presence in the South Caucasus and in Central Asia. Over the last twenty years, Turkey has transformed into a) an indispensable energy hub, b) a leader of the Turkic world, and c) a source of support for Palestinian interests. Its aim was to secure and to promote Turkey’s strategic interests.

Seeking friends among Central Asian Muslim-majority republics, Israel hoped for a legitimisation and improvement of its relations with the Muslim world, and thereby for their support in the United Nations. However, it was also looking for new markets for its military equipment and technologies.

In its turn, Azerbaijan was looking for full political, military and economic support in order to achieve its strategic goal: the restoration of its territorial integrity by force after defeat in the first Karabakh war (1991-1994). Azerbaijan did not trust Russia as a

Photo: Office of the President of Azerbaijan



**President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev has been awarded the “Supreme Order of Turkic World” in Istanbul.**

partner, owing to its close ties with Armenia, and therefore aimed to avoid involvement in Russia-led organisations, and in any conflicts with Russia and Iran regarding the status of the Caspian Sea. Generous Western investments helped Azerbaijan to develop its energy sector and to compete with Russia as an energy supplier – and notably, one that bypassed Russian territory. Indeed, Baku has gradually become an alternate energy source for its Western partners, as well as for Ankara and Tel Aviv. Azerbaijan has been directing its oil and gas revenues toward the purchase of advanced military equipment (mainly offensive), munitions, and limited military technologies from Russia, Turkey, and Israel. The same financial flows have been used to acquire the political support of Turkish and Israeli lobbies in the US and, hence, to reduce the influence of the Armenian lobby

on all issues related to the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In particular, in October 2001, Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act (enacted in 1992) was waived – thereby allowing the US administration to provide direct military aid to Azerbaijan. Since then, US military assistance provided to Azerbaijan has disproportionately increased in comparison with assistance to Armenia (in 2019, it was USD 100 million vs. USD 4.2 million; in 2022 – USD 164 million vs. USD 600,000).

Both Turkey and Azerbaijan view each other in broad terms as natural strategic partners. In the course of the first Karabakh war (1991-1994) Turkey proved its absolute loyalty to Azerbaijan: in 1993, for example, it closed its border with Armenia in support of Azerbaijan. Turkey is a direct consumer of and the transit country for Azerbaijan’s energy resources. More

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Photo: Office of the President of Azerbaijan

**President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev has received the Minister of Defense of Israel Benjamin Gantz. The sides exchanged views on the long-term military-technical cooperation between the two countries and prospects in this area.**

recently, Turkey has also been a provider of military equipment, and training for the Azerbaijani Army. Frequent Turkish-Azerbaijani military exercises, as well as the training of command personnel in line with NATO standards have become one of the cornerstones of the Azerbaijani government's efforts to modernize its army and prepare it for war.

Since their mutual recognition of each other in 1991, the Azerbaijani-Israeli relationship has been based on pragmatism and mutual understanding. Both states especially value strategic cooperation in defense and intelligence and largely ignore secondary issues such as the anti-Israeli resolutions periodically adopted by the Organisation of Islamic Conference, or Israel's anti-Palestinian actions. This *modus operandi* provides both states with greater flexibility and enables avoidance of possible conflicts. Currently, Azerbaijan supplies more than 50% of Israel's oil, and serves as a base for Israeli intelligence gathering against Iran.

Over the course of thirty years Azerbaijan has gradually become a treasured partner for Turkey and Israel. It acts as an important energy provider, especially against the background of Russia's war in Ukraine, a bridge to Central Asia, a customer for both states' military equipment, a supportive member in the main international organisations. Correspondingly, Turkey and Israel have helped Azerbaijan to restore its territorial integrity, lobbied on behalf of its interests in US, EU, and UN political circles. They also provided Azerbaijan with crucial military, informational, intelligence, political, and diplomatic support throughout the duration of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war.

## A Geopolitical Palette

The analysis of Turkish-Israeli-Azeri interaction on the eve of the 2020 Karabakh war should be placed within the context of geopolitical interests of external actors. Turkey has undergone significant shift in foreign policy – from “zero problems with neighbours” to a maximalist and often aggressive involvement in a broad spectrum of regional affairs under Erdoğan's leadership, affecting Turkish-Israeli relations. In particular, the Mavi Marmara incident on May, 31, 2010, resulted in the suspension of Turkish-Israeli diplomatic relations, which to a different degree influenced their cooperation, especially in the military and intelligence spheres. In May 2018, not long after US recognised Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, Turkey recalled its ambassadors to the US and Israel.

Several complex issues still exist between Israel and Turkey, each of which can be considered a source of mutual mistrust. Among them are Turkey's negative reaction to Israel's rapprochement with the UAE and Bahrain (the Abraham Accords, August, 2020), and Israel's opposition to Turkey's continuing support for the Palestinian cause, as well as Turkey's relationship with Hamas.

However, both Turkey and Israel desperately needed to coordinate their efforts in order a) to prevent a spillover of the Syrian civil war; b) to facilitate the export of Israeli natural gas through Turkey to Europe thereby also bolstering Turkey's role as an energy hub; and c) to restore and increase full-scale cooperation. A push toward their reconciliation came from the US: The Arab Spring, the spread of Islamist terrorism, and Iran's nuclear programme were core issues

of concern for the last three American administrations. All viewed the Turkish-Israeli tandem as crucial for dealing with various crises in the Middle East.

A fragile balance of power also contributed to the Turkey-Israel reconciliation. In particular, the Russian-Turkish relationship has been deteriorating against the background of the Syrian crisis, Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 (which Turkey strongly criticized), their conflicting interests in the South Caucasus, and more recently around the War in Ukraine.

An improvement in the Russian-Israeli relationship coincided with the interests of both states in developing relations with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the UAE; with Israel's silent support of Russia's involvement in the Syrian civil war in opposition to Turkey and Iran. Israel also took a neutral position on the UN vote regarding Russia's annexation of Crimea. The two countries also share the same concerns vis-à-vis Turkey's Neo-Ottoman ambitions.

For its part, Iran has been trying to improve its relations with Turkey by taking advantage of any tension occurring between Turkey and Israel. It has become more vocal by articulating its strategic interests in the South Caucasus, by strengthening its ties with Russia, and by working on establishing an anti-American Iran-Russia-Turkey alliance.

In this geopolitical situation Armenia and Azerbaijan have sought to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict from diametrically opposite positions. The Armenian side made efforts to prolong the negotiation process under the aegis of the OSCE Minsk Group, thereby hoping to at least prevent a military escalation in the area. Azerbaijan on the other hand was quickly

moving toward a military solution through a) neutralization of Russia, b) rejection of the Minsk Group negotiation format, and c) enlarging and deepening cooperation in military sphere with both Israel and Turkey.

### The “Troika” and the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War

The balance of power in the South Caucasus region has begun to shift gradually in favour of Azerbaijan. This has occurred as a consequence of two main factors: the political will of its leadership to modernize Azerbaijan’s army, and the deepening of its military cooperation with Turkey and Israel.

The key document which has framed the Turkey-Azerbaijan partnership is the Azerbaijani-Turkish Agreement on Strategic Partnership and Mutual Support (ASPMS) signed in August 2010, and enacted at

played a significant role in strengthening their capabilities.

The two states have gradually intensified their joint military training – in 2018, the two held seven joint exercises, and in 2019 this had grown to 13, some of which also included the participation of Georgia’s SOF. The combat preparedness of the Azerbaijani Armed Forces was tested during 13-day joint Turkish-Azerbaijani manoeuvres spanning from late July to early August 2020 at various locations in Azerbaijan. According to some sources, up to 11,000 Turkish military personnel participated in the manoeuvres, which were the largest in the history of Turkish-Azerbaijani military cooperation. They included testing of fire support coordination, joint planning and joint operations, as well as rapid response capabilities.

Another critical actor on the eve of and during the 2020 Karabakh war was Israel, which has become the main weapons sup-

Azerbaijan’s Ministry of Defence and Israeli company Aeronautics Defense Systems, produced the Aerostar and Orbiter 2M UAVs under Israeli license.

These types of systems significantly strengthened Azerbaijan’s precision-strike capabilities, providing its army with both tactical and strategic superiority over the Armenian Armed Forces. At the beginning of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War, which lasted from 27 September to 10 November 2020, Azerbaijan’s Air Forces were equipped with 36 Turkish Bayraktar TB2 UAVs, as well as Israeli Elbit Hermes 450/900, Aerostar, and SkyStriker UAVs, 48 Harop and a large number of Orbiter 1K loitering munitions, LORA theatre ballistic missiles (comprising 4 launchers and 50 missiles) and EXTRA guided rocket artillery systems (comprising 6 launchers and 50 missiles). Over the course of the conflict, both Turkey and Israel continued to supply advanced weapons to the Azerbaijani army. Both also coordinated with each other and the Azerbaijani leadership, providing intelligence and helping to coordinate air strikes.



Photo: Office of the President of Azerbaijan

**President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev has met with then-Prime Minister of the State of Israel Benjamin Netanyahu in Davos. The Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s visit to Azerbaijan was recalled at the meeting. The new impetus that the results of the trip gave to the development of the Azeri-Israeli bilateral relations was emphasised.**

the beginning of 2011. One month later, the allies signed a “Joint Statement on the Establishment of a High-level Strategic Cooperation Council.” In accordance with the Agreement, the two states are obliged to cooperate when either country faces aggression from a third state or group of states. It was an agreement on joint defence, which allowed both to take certain pre-emptive measures. Turkey has been providing the Azerbaijani army with modern weapons, as well as military education and training, which includes an adaptation of NATO’s compatibility model. Serious investments were made in the Azeri Special Operational Forces (SOF), and once again, Turkey’s military assistance

played a significant role in strengthening their capabilities. According to SIPRI data, between 2013 and 2017 Azerbaijan received 30% of its arms import from Israel; in 2015-2019 it reached 60%, and in 2020 reached 69%. The main Israeli partners of Azerbaijan’s Ministry of Defence Industry are Elbit Systems and Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI). Azerbaijan’s military purchases from Israel are impressive: In 2012 the country spent USD 1.6 billion, in 2016, USD 5 billion, and in 2017, another USD 127 million. Most of this money was allocated for the purchase of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), loitering munitions, and reconnaissance satellite technology. The Baku-based Azad Systems Co., a joint venture established in 2011 by

### Regional Shifts

The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war marked the beginning of long-term changes in the South Caucasus. For starters, Turkey has cemented its military presence in the region, and Israel has significantly strengthened its ties with Azerbaijan. Alongside this, the war in Ukraine significantly reduced Russia’s ability to intervene in affairs in the South Caucasus.

In December 2020, the President of Azerbaijan offered his services as an intermediary between Turkey and Israel, thus acknowledging the role they played in the Nagorno-Karabakh war. His offer was combined with US efforts on this matter. Turkey and Israel announced the restoration of diplomatic relations in August 2022, yet it remains unclear whether the formal restoration of diplomatic relations will open the door to a resumption of full-scale cooperation between these two regional actors. However, it is obvious that both Turkey and Israel benefit from and value intensely the bilateral cooperation with Azerbaijan. It is worth noting that Azerbaijan is Turkey’s most significant partner on the path toward realisation of their regional ambitions, especially on the route toward the establishment of a ‘Turkic World’. Azerbaijan in turn is very much interested in continuity and deepening of its partnerships with Turkey and Israel. It recognises that without their assistance it would likely fall under Russia’s influence, and would possess neither the military nor the political power to reshape the Armenian-Azerbaijani state borders.