

Opportunities & Challenges

in Israeli-Azerbaijani Relations

**Alexander
Murinson***

Abstract

A controversial article in the influential Foreign Policy magazine stirred a debate whether Israel would use the Azerbaijani territory as a “basing” facility in its possible air strike against Iran. Israel is weighing its options in the event that Western economic and political sanctions do not compel Iran to stop its nuclear program. At the same time, the Jewish state is aware of Azerbaijan’s sensitivities in its dangerous neighborhood, and wants to preserve the valuable friendship with an emerging regional leader in the South Caucasus. The South Caucasus is a geographic area of a special concern to Israel because it borders Iran and serves as a gateway to the hydrocarbon reaches of the Caspian. Azerbaijan became a natural ally of Israel as a secular state that shares strategic perceptions on regional threats such as Iran and Armenia. The latter serves as a proxy of Russia in the South Caucasus and is tightly aligned with Iran. Azerbaijan, alone in the region, is positioned to benefit from its unique tradition of amity and hospitality towards Jews. Azerbaijan sees in Israel not only a powerful ally in Washington, but also a source of sophisticated military hardware, intelligence and security equipment. As a friendly Muslim nation, Azerbaijan has gained special importance for Israel since Turkey, under the AKP, shifted its foreign policy from a strategic partnership with Israel to closer relations with Iran and Syria. This mutually beneficial relationship is flourishing and provides both countries with unique strategic advantages.

** Dr. Alexander Murinson, the author of “Turkey’s Entente with Israel and Azerbaijan: State Identity and Security in the Middle East and Caucasus” (Routledge, 2009) and, currently, a Visiting Scholar at the International Institute for Caucasus Studies, Ilia State University, Georgia and a researcher at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Bar Ilan University, Israel.*

Despite a provocative article published in the *Foreign Policy* magazine¹ in the end of March, it is no science fiction that Israel, a Jewish state, and Azerbaijan, a Shia Muslim-majority state on the south-eastern foothills of the Caucasus, are forging ahead in building a constructive and multifaceted relationship that can serve as a model for other Muslim countries. The Israeli Foreign Minister, Avigdor Lieberman, quipped during his recent visit to Baku: “Azerbaijan is more important for Israel than France.” With Lieberman’s visit on April 23, 2012, Azerbaijani-Israeli ties reached a new level of intimacy and depth. The Azerbaijani leadership welcomed further expansion of not only political and strategic cooperation, but also signed agreements to enhance the people-to-people contacts between the two countries in such areas as tourism, medium and small business trade and investment, and cultural and educational exchanges. Furthermore, this visit was intended to calm down the storm in the teacup that resulted from this unfortunate journalistic canard, which sought to sow seeds of mutual suspicion between friendly nations and raise the ire of the Iranians, who are already furious at Azerbaijan’s chutzpah at wielding such close ties with the Jewish state. What followed during the visit was a sincere discussion about the future of bilateral relations in the wake

¹ See Mark Perry, “Israel’s Secret Staging Ground”, *Foreign Policy Magazine*, March 28, 2012.

Azerbaijan is more important for Israel than France.

of the notorious article, published in *Foreign Policy* magazine by an American journalist.² Mark Perry’s article alleges that four unidentified American senior diplomats and military intelligence officers came to the conclusion that Israel has recently been granted access to airbases on Iran’s northern border to be used in a potential air attack against Iranian nuclear facilities. The article continues to quote another unidentified source saying that U.S. intelligence officials are increasingly concerned that Israel’s military expansion into Azerbaijan complicates U.S. efforts to dampen Israeli-Iranian tensions. The “exposé” injected a sense of unease into the bilateral relations and suggested an anti-Israeli political agenda.³ But this media spin failed to undermine the Azerbaijan-Israeli understanding and close friendship. By claiming that Israel purchased the “basing rights” for an impending Israeli air attack on Iran, the *Foreign Policy* author intended to jeopardize this relationship and to weaken Azerbaijan’s confidence in Israel’s intentions. Responding to this claim, Lieberman insisted: ‘I think part of reporters commenting on the weaponry supply issue have great imagination

² Mark Perry, “Israel’s Secret Staging Ground”, *Foreign Policy Magazine*, March 28, 2012

³ Mark Perry served as an unofficial advisor to PLO Chairman and Palestinian President Yasser Arafat from 1989 to 2004. Jonathan Neumann, “Our Defenders at the CIA,” *Jewish Ideas Daily*, Jan. 18, 2012.

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and would better write scientific-fantastic scenarios for participation in different contests’ [sic].

With the deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations after the Mavi Marmara incident on 31 May 2010, Israel made the South Caucasus one of the priorities of its Eurasian foreign policy. The pace of the development of the bilateral ties with Azerbaijan, Turkey’s fellow secular and Turkic republic, surpassed all expectations, while the Islamization of Turkish foreign policy ended the Turkish-Israeli strategic cooperation of the 1990s.⁴ Israel is seeking to dispel the impression that as a new partner to the independent states of the Caucasus it is exclusively pursuing its strategic interests regarding its confrontation with Iran, and Azerbaijan emerged as its main partner in the South Cau-

4 After AK (White or Pure) Party’s coming to power in 2002, a fundamental change occurred in Turkey. The neo-Ottoman ideology became the driving force in foreign policy, namely the powerful drive to recapture the Golden Age of Abdulhamid’s empire, based on the emotional mix of Turkish nationalism and the Islamic revivalism. See Alexander Murinson, “The Strategic Depth Doctrine: A New Paradigm of the Turkish Foreign Policy” in *Middle Eastern Studies* Vol. 42, Number 6, November 2006.

casus. The growing diplomatic confrontation between Turkey and Israel has propelled Israel into the thick of the respective national foreign policies of the states of South Caucasus. The fault-lines of a number of regional and also global interests intersect across this region. As demonstrated by the August 2008 Russian war against Georgia, Russia wants to singlehandedly control all political and economic processes in the South Caucasus. At the same time, the United States envisions the new states of the Caucasus as potential members of the Euro-Atlantic community. Israel, a regional power in its own right, sees this region as an important source of energy, and a key export market and bridgehead to Central Eurasia. The local conflicts make these countries potential buyers for Israeli military industries. Azerbaijan, as an energy-rich country bordering Iran, is a strong partner for Israel. Turkey, which has transitioned from being a close ally to a virtual enemy of Israel, is also vying for a bigger say in the affairs of the Caucasus. The situation is additionally complicated by the fact that the classic rule of any diplomatic or armed conflict: “the enemy of my enemy is my friend,” is not applicable for Israel in this case. Armenia, after nearly century of warring with the Turks, is suddenly eager to patch up things with Ankara; at the same time, Yerevan is Tehran’s key ally in the Caucasus. In this case, Ankara’s main regional ally - Baku – remains an essential strategic partner of the

Jewish state in the Muslim world, especially after the Arab Spring rebellion. Azerbaijan also perceives Iran as existential threat, which makes it a natural ally to Israel. This balance of power deprives Israel of room for maneuver in the South Caucasus. But the conflict between Ankara and Jerusalem in itself continues to generate much speculation about the possible consequences for the region. This growing divergence in geostrategic standpoints between Turkey and Israel puts a great deal of pressure on the Azerbaijani-Israeli relationship by making it contingent upon the cooperation between Iran and Armenia.

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But given current the strengthening of the Russia-Armenia-Iran axis, it is unlikely that Armenia will change its foreign policy in the foreseeable future, despite the increased Western pressure to break its relations with Iran.

At the same time, Azerbaijan is deepening its political and strategic relations with Israel in order to improve its public image in the United States, by using the resources of the Jewish lobby in the U.S. Congress and the

upcoming presidential elections. This lobbying campaign will eventually translate into American diplomatic and political support for Azerbaijani national causes such as the fate of Nagorno-Karabakh. This trend became even clearer after Turkey signed the 2009 Swiss Protocols with Armenia, which ignored the fate of the occupied Azerbaijani territories. Azerbaijan was extremely disappointed by Turkish foreign policy in the South Caucasus after Ahmet Davutoglu became Foreign Minister, and launched the “zero problems” policy, which included Armenia. This in turn prompted Azerbaijan to distance itself from Turkey; at the same time, Israeli policy became more closely aligned with Azerbaijani national interests. The Azerbaijani leadership intends to reach out to the American public and the Armenian lobby in order to change diplomatic dynamics in seeking a resolution to the Nagorno-Karabakh problem, within the political framework of the preservation of territorial integrity, and committing to grant a high level of autonomy to the Armenian community of the Nagorno-Karabakh.

Israel has on many occasions confirmed that it is a reliable partner to Azerbaijan in regard to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In adhering to the policy of supporting the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, consecutive Israeli governments have confirmed this principle, and Israel will not recognize the Nagorno-Karabakh self-

proclaimed entity. During his recent visit to Baku, Avigdor Lieberman said: “We support the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and support a peaceful solution to the conflict. We hope that the conflict will be resolved fairly.”

Azerbaijan’s Dilemma

The departure of U.S. troops from Iraq, completed on December 18, 2011, left the vacuum that was immediately filled by Iran and its political proxies, the Shia parties and the Iraqi President Al-Maliki. The expanding relations between Azerbaijan and Israel worry Iran, because the Islamic Republic realizes that its small oil-rich neighbor, which has quickly grown in international stature, has the capacity to undermine the Mollahs’ regime stability by igniting domestic protests by the largest Iranian majority, Azeri Turk. There are an estimated 25 to 30 million ethnic Azerbaijanis in Iran. Azerbaijan has served as a magnet for the nationalist aspirations of marginalized Azeri Turks; moreover there is a historical precedent: in 1945, an Azerbaijani Democratic Republic, supported by the Soviet troops, was proclaimed in northern Iran. Since Azerbaijan gained independence in 1992, Iran has been watching Azerbaijani’s increasing economic and military strength. In a move that has further soured Iran-Azerbaijan relations, Iran has developed robust cooperation with Christian Armenia, while Arme-

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nian troops are occupying 20 percent of Azerbaijan’s territory. Azerbaijan, as a sovereign state, has been rapidly building its military potential in order to recover its occupied region of Nagorno-Karabakh by all legal means. The purchase advanced weapons systems from Israel for the reported sum of \$1.6 billion has raised the temperature in the pressure-cooker of the Azerbaijani-Iranian relationship.⁵ This information was published in the Israeli media, without concern for Azerbaijan, sandwiched between the threatening shadow of Iran, its southern neighbor, and a former Russian imperial master to the north. Azerbaijan, a close friend of the United States and Israel in the Caucasus, wants to avoid being directly involved in the Western confrontation with Iran. At the same time, Azerbaijan’s closeness with Israel angers Iran, which since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, has identified the Jewish state as the “Little Satan”, while the role of the “Great Satan” is assigned to the United States.

Amidst increasing international isolation and the looming threat of an

5 Israel inks \$1.6 billion arms deal with Azerbaijan By AMY TEIBEL | Associated Press – Sun, Feb 26, 2012. <http://news.yahoo.com/israel-inks-1-6-billion-arms-deal-azerbaijan-150647547.html>

American/Israeli or combined strike against Iranian nuclear facilities, Iran has accused Azerbaijan of threatening Iranian security and providing facilities to non-regional actors, implicating Israel. The international community, led by the United Nations, has accused Iran, based on an IAA report, of enriching uranium in an effort to create a “break-out” nuclear capability with a view to building nuclear weapons. The Azerbaijani authorities responded by sending a delegation led by Azerbaijan’s Minister of Defense Safar Abiyev to explain the Azerbaijani view on this issue and prevent increased tensions between the two neighbors.

History of Bilateral Relations

A diplomatic triumph achieved by Israeli president Shimon Peres during his June 28 - July 1 visit to Azerbaijan in 2009⁶, followed by several meetings with Israel’s Foreign Minister, have brought Israel closer to the status of regional player in this geopolitically important and resource-rich region with its predominantly Muslim population. In the context of the instability that grips Iran under the Mollahs’ regime, whose nuclear ambitions threaten global security, Israel’s success seems even more striking. Israel has actively sought to establish friendly and cooperative relations with Azerbaijan and other Muslim states in the post-Soviet

space. Israeli-Azerbaijani relations serve as a model for cooperation between the Jewish state and Muslim nations. Israel sought to establish close strategic relations with the Muslim countries of Eurasia, because the developments in this geopolitical region profoundly affect the stability of the Middle East, due to its territorial proximity and the size of the predominantly Muslim population of Central Asia and Azerbaijan. The threats of Islamic radicalism and terrorism also unite Israel with the elite and secular middle class in this nation. The natural riches of the region make cooperation with these nations even more attractive.

Azerbaijan established strategic cooperation with Israel in the mid-1990s. Twelve years ago, in August 1997, Israeli Prime Benjamin Netanyahu visited Baku to meet with the late President Heydar Aliyev. During this visit, both leaders discussed the threats posed by Iran, and the possibility of Israeli-Azerbaijani intelligence cooperation.⁷ In the intermittent years, the strategic relationship has flourished out of the limelight.⁸ The Israeli defense industries have provided artillery, anti-tank and anti-infantry weapons to Azerbaijan. Israel’s Mossad began active cooperation with Azerbaijani security services.⁹ A

6 Alexander Murinson, “Peres proves a hit in Azerbaijan,” *Jerusalem Post*, July 6, 2009.

7 “Netanyahu Meets with President of Azerbaijan in Baku,” *Israel Line*, August 29, 1997, available at <http://fas.org/irp/news/1997/970829-il.htm>

8 Ilya Bourtman, “Israel and Azerbaijan’s Furtive Embrace,” *Middle East Quarterly*, Summer 2006, pp. 47-57.

9 *Jane’s Defense Weekly*, Oct. 16, 1996.

Mossad Station was created and led by Michael Ross in Baku in 1998-2000.¹⁰ As a result, a group of al-Qaeda operatives, who masterminded the 1998 U.S. Embassy bombings in Tanzania and Kenya on August 7, 1998, were arrested later that year in Baku. Among the arrested was Ahmed Salama Marzouk, a top-three commander in al-Qaeda directly responsible to Osama Ben Ladin's deputy Ayman al Zawahiri.¹¹

Azerbaijan is enmeshed in a frozen conflict with Armenia over the self-proclaimed Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh. In view of the unresolved conflict with Armenia, Azerbaijan is pursuing a major program of modernization of its armed forces. Azerbaijan is also connected through its history, culture and religion with Iran. Despite its public declaration of support of Azerbaijan's demands for territorial integrity, Iran maintains friendly relations with Armenia and supplies it with critically important fuel, natural gas. In fact, Iran upgraded its relationship with Armenia to the level of strategic partnership in 2006. In July of that year, Armenia and Iran signed a multi-million deal that involves connecting the energy grids of both countries.¹² Armenia and Iran have agreed in particular to press on with the implementation of

¹⁰ Michael Ross, *The Volunteer: The Incredible True Story of an Israeli Spy on the Trail of International Terrorists* (Skyhorse Publishing, 2007) pp.217-225.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Emil Danielyan, "Armenia Deepens Ties with Embattled Iran," *Eurasia Insight*, July 28, 2006

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more energy projects in addition to the ongoing construction of a pipeline that will pump Iranian natural gas to Armenia.

Azerbaijan is concerned about the growing threat of Iranian state-sponsored terrorism. The Azerbaijani authorities perceive the export of Islamic revolution as an existential threat. Baku's growing engagement with Israel raises ire in the Islamic Republic. The recent indictment in Baku of a terrorist cell sponsored and financed by the Iran's Revolutionary Guards (Sepah-e Pasdaran) is a case in point. The members of the terrorist cell, which included Lebanese and Azerbaijani citizens, had planned attacks on the Israeli Embassy and the Gabala Radar Station, and were indicted on July 3, 2009.¹³ Iran's Azerbaijani population (by some estimates as high as 25 million) serves as a source of tension between the two countries due to the threat of irredentism. Azerbaijan also faces Iranian claims on some of its oil fields as a result of Iran's refusal to acknowledge the division into equally large sectors of

¹³ "My gotovu vzorvat posolstvo Izrailya", *Zerkalo*, July 4, 2009.

the territorial waters of the Caspian Sea, the status of which is still unresolved due to lack of mutual agreement among coastal states. These Iranian territorial claims in the Caspian Sea cause significant concerns in Baku. The shared threat perception projected by Iran makes Azerbaijan and Israel natural allies.

The Iranian authorities responded to the Israeli strategic presence in Azerbaijan with a campaign of intimidation. Since Ilham Aliyev came to power in 2003, Iranian high officials have paid several visits to Baku carrying threats to the Azerbaijani authorities. A group of high-ranking military officers visited Baku in August 2004 and urged Azerbaijan to observe the following conditions in exchange for the improvement of Azerbaijani-Iranian relations, both in general and in particular in relation to the disputed exploitation rights of the Caspian resources. The Iranians demanded that Azerbaijan (a) shut down an alleged Israeli intelligence station in the country, and evict Israeli agents there; (b) dismantle the electronic listening stations that the Israelis had allegedly set up along the Caspian and the Iranian border; (c) cease receiving Israeli military and intelligence officers.¹⁴ On May 21, 2009, in the wake President Shimon Peres' visit, the Iranian Chief of Staff Hasan Firudabadi made public threats directed at Azerbaijan. He referred to

¹⁴ See "Iran Bullies Israel's Strategic Friends- with Eye on Washington," *Debkafile Special Report*, August 22, 2004.

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the Israeli president's visit as an "incorrect step." He added: "The Shimon Peres visit does not seem like a friendly step in Azerbaijani relations with Iran."¹⁵

Since 2006, Israel has increased its military profile in the South Caucasus. Israel supplied advanced military hardware and trained the Georgian Special Forces before the 2008 August War.¹⁶ In particular, Israel's military technology gave a qualitative edge to Georgian reconnaissance capabilities with the use of Israeli-made Hermes Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs). Shortly following the war against its neighbor, Azerbaijan agreed to buy a new consignment of military hardware from Israel in September 2008. On September 26, the Israeli daily *Haaretz* reported that Azerbaijan was going to purchase Israeli weapon systems, including ammunition and mortars, and military radio equipment worth hundreds of millions of dollars.¹⁷ But the most important breakthrough in Azerbaijani-Israeli strategic cooperation came during the Israeli president's visit in June. The Director of

¹⁵ Alexander Murinson, "A Welcome New Stage in Azerbaijani-Israeli Ties," *Jerusalem Post*, June 17, 2009.

¹⁶ "Russia: Izrail pytalsya vooruzhit Gruzity do zubov," *Mignews*, August 19, 2008.

¹⁷ Yossi Melman, "Israel and Azerbaijan close multi-million dollar arms deal," *Haaretz*, September 26, 2009.

Aeronautics Defense Systems Avi Leumi, who was a member of the Israeli delegation that accompanied Shimon Peres, signed a contract with the Azerbaijani government to build a factory that would produce UAVs under Israeli license in Azerbaijan.¹⁸

The 2008 War in the Caucasus

In an unusual twist of events caused by the Russian attempt to re-establish control in the Caucasus, Turkey found it expedient to accommodate Russia, because the West did not step in to defend Georgia. Furthermore, Turkey, Baku's erstwhile ally, is under the government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan making diplomatic moves towards re-opening the border with Armenia. This border has been closed since the Armenian occupation of 20 percent of the Azerbaijani territory, and thus Azerbaijan feels a sense of betrayal. Turkey's less than firm commitment to the restoration of full territorial integrity has damaged relations with Azerbaijan. As the result, Baku is seeking alternative strategic partners that could strengthen the projection of its military power. Azerbaijani leadership on many occasions has indicated that if the international community tries to impose an unjust solution to the Karabakh question, Azerbaijan might resort to military means to recover its ter-

¹⁸ According to the Israeli ambassador Arthur Lenk, it took two years to prepare this agreement. See "During Shimon Peres' visit a contract was signed to build a UAV's plant," MIGnews.com, September 27, 2009.

ritory. This intention is reflected in the nation's defense spending. Azerbaijan has steadily increased its military capabilities over the last several years. Its fragile position in the event of a Turkish-Armenian agreement appears only to have encouraged this trend, with a 30 percent increase in its already high military spending in 2009, reaching \$3.5 billion in 2012.

Turkish Gambit

The precarious state of bilateral relations, indeed the open hostility of Ankara towards Israel after 2008, puts Azerbaijan as Turkey's close strategic partner, into an unenviable position. Whereas the circumstances compel the young Caucasian state to side with one country or the other, Azerbaijan wisely employs a pragmatic approach in relations with both. So far, Azerbaijani diplomacy has successfully managed these tensions. Behind the scenes, Azerbaijan serves as a "backchannel" for off-the-record exchanges between the two former close allies. The head of the Azerbaijani Center for Euro-Atlantic Cooperation Sulhaddin Akper commented on this complex dynamic on October 13, 2011: "The deterioration of the bilateral relations does reflect interests of both countries, and it is not in Azerbaijan's interest. So, Azerbaijan must act in cooperation with Turkey, on the one hand, but on the other hand, the government must convince Israel that Baku is ready to contribute to alleviation of the tensions."

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In September 2011, Azerbaijani diplomacy passed its first test in conflict management. The Turkish ambassador to Azerbaijan called on Baku to stand beside Ankara in its diplomatic struggle against Israel and “reconsider” its relations with the Jewish State, a Persian-language US-based website reported on September 25, 2011. According to the report, Ambassador Hulusi Kilic said that Israel should take into account “possible problems” with the oil pipeline that crosses from Azerbaijan to Turkey, and also supplies oil to Israel. He did not go into further details.¹⁹

The Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline supplies 10 to 20 percent of Israel’s oil. A similar amount is supplied to Israel by Kazakhstan, through the same pipeline that crosses through Turkey. Responding to the Turkish ambassador’s comments, Ambassador to Baku Michael Lavon Lotem said that third-party interests should not be allowed to affect strategic relations between Jerusalem and Baku. Azerbaijan has become an important strategic asset for Israel’s security and foreign affairs. In 2010, trade between the two countries totaled more than \$2 billion – more than double the trade between Azerbaijan and

Turkey. Baku has yet to issue a response to the Turkish ambassador’s remarks, but at the time, the head of the Azeri Press Office told the local radio station that Azerbaijan hopes the “crisis between Israel and Turkey ends soon.”

Israel is weighing its options, including a military one, against Iran. The Israeli leadership concluded that a nuclear Iran would present the “existential” threat. Considering the airstrike, Israel obviously takes into account the interests and concerns of its allies, including Azerbaijan, but the decision will be primarily driven by Israeli strategic calculations. Israel can inflict an air strike or a series of strikes against Iran on its own, but the Israeli army will conduct land operations only within a coalition, most likely lead by NATO alliance, with possible participation of Saudi Arabia, and the other Gulf States. In this eventuality, Turkey will fall in line as a member of NATO. The same can be said for Azerbaijan, if other Muslim countries join the fight. In this case, we are likely to see Israel and Turkey as equal coalition partners. In the meantime, Israel is consulting with its allies to square all the details. This type of consultation could be one of the reasons behind Lieberman’s visit to Azerbaijan. Another important development in the Israeli domestic politics affecting the decision to attack Iran was a last minute flip-flop in the declared national elections, projected to take place in Septem-

19 Dudi Cohen, “Turkey to Azerbaijan: Stand with us against Israel”, *Ynetnews.com*, September 25, 2011, available at <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-127332,00.html>.

ber 2012 The all-night discussion between Prime Minister Benjamin (“Bibi”) Netanyahu and the leader of the Opposition, the head of Kadima party Shaul Mofa, resulted in formation of National Unity government. This political move by the Israeli leadership makes a military operation against Iran more rather than less likely.

Conclusion

Due to its geographic position, Azerbaijan, being sandwiched between Russia and Iran, needs to tread carefully between the interests of these regional powers. However, the economic muscle gained in the last two decades as the result of the opening of its petrochemical resources to the Western markets has made it possible for Azerbaijan to become the central power in the Caucasus. Israel has strategic interests in forming close ties with the South Caucasian states, especially Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijani strategists also perceive the Islamic regime in Tehran as an “existential” threat. This historical animosity and mutual suspicion is not new. Rather, these negative perceptions by both countries are the result of historical claims on Azerbaijani lands by Iran. At the same time, Iran feels threatened by a growing threat of separatism in two Azerbaijani provinces in the north-west. There are an estimated twenty to thirty million Azeri Turks living in Iran, but

who increasingly identify with the independent Azerbaijani state.

By changing the region’s fragile military balance, Azerbaijan would be in a better position to push its justifiable demands for the restoration of Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijani sovereignty. The participation of Israel’s Aeronautics Defense Systems, the world’s leading manufacturer of reconnaissance and combat UAVs will give Azerbaijan a qualitative edge over its potential adversaries. This also opens new horizons for military technology transfers from Israel to Azerbaijan and for Azerbaijan in becoming a supplier to the regional weapons market. Israel gains an important customer in a critical region, which in turn opens up a real possibility that Azerbaijan will become a hub of Israeli presence in the Caucasus on par with Georgia. In strategic terms, Israel sees Azerbaijan as a balancing power in its own growing contest with Turkey for superiority in the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean. But possible military operation against Iran is likely to reshuffle all regional cards. This operation by a Western military coalition will force Turkey to mend its relations with Israel.