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## The Iran-Israel-Azerbaijan Triangle: Implications on Regional Security

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### **Abstract**

Iran's nuclear plans and Israel's attempts to deter a nuclear Iran are part of the Israeli-Iranian 'secret war', a 'war' which has recently spread beyond the boundaries of Israel and Iran. Accordingly, Azerbaijani officials have speculated that the Hezbollah and even Iran may be responsible for recent plans to attack an Israeli politician and members of the Jewish community in Azerbaijan. These foiled attacks and the consequent fear over potential future attacks backed by Iran have led to heightened tension between Azerbaijan and Iran and greater speculation that Azerbaijan may become a battleground of the Israeli-Iranian secret war. This article will provide a political and security assessment of Israel-Iran-Azerbaijan triangular relations, particularly in the context of Iran's growing nuclear capability. The article shall cover the recent foiled attacks in Azerbaijan and introduce one of the main sources of tension between Iran and Azerbaijan, Iranian Azerbaijanis. Iranian fears over irredentist claims and Turkish influence over ethnic Azerbaijanis living in Iran have fuelled discrimination against this group with instances such as the Cartoon Crisis and the Lake Urmia incident. Furthermore, a background and recent developments of relations between these countries shall be provided. While relations between Iran and Azerbaijan have been historically been cordial, they have been growing increasingly more distant due to Iran's support of Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, alliance with Russia in the case of the status of the Caspian Sea, attempt to influence Azerbaijan's political and religious orientation, and due to recent events including Azerbaijan's growing cooperation with the United States and Israel. Similarly, relations between Iran and Israel shifted from warm under the time of the Shah to sour following the Iranian Revolution, primarily due to Israeli officials' belief that Iran has sponsored terror groups hostile to Israel, fear over Iran's growing nuclear capability, and Ahmadinejad's anti-Zionist rhetoric in 2007 that caused Israel to

demand Iran's expulsion from the UN. In light of these factors, Israeli officials have come to denounce Iran's nuclear program, a move which has led to speculation that Israel may be planning an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities. Alternatively, relations between Israel and Azerbaijan have been warm since the 1990s when Azerbaijan reached out to Israel to help rebuild its military following the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. Azerbaijan and Israel have cooperated increasingly in the areas of economics and security, a factor that has alarmed Iranian authorities who fear possible Israeli attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities. Israeli threats of attack are fiercely debated and the US has remained relatively ambiguous on this matter. Such an attack by Israelis may result in fierce retaliation by Iran either in the form of direct military strike against Israel or attacks against Israeli (and possibly Azerbaijani and US) targets all over the world. Azerbaijan's increased military cooperation with Israel and the West, its key geographical location, and the existence of a pro-separatist Azerbaijani minority in Iran suggest that should the Israeli-Iranian secret war escalate, Azerbaijan may indeed become involved or become a proxy of Israeli-Iranian confrontation.

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**Keywords**

nuclear; Israel; Iran; Azerbaijan; attack

## 1. Introduction

At the beginning of this year, Azerbaijani authorities issued a series of announcements regarding a plot of three Azerbaijani citizens to assassinate some leading members of the Jewish community, including local rabbis and an Israeli ambassador in Baku. Azerbaijani officials have speculated that the Hezbollah and even Iran might be involved in these deterred attacks (Ravid, 2012). The anticipation of an attack has created greater tension between the Islamic Republic of Iran and its northern neighbour, Azerbaijan, a post-Soviet country in the South Caucasus with a population of 9 million. Is tension over a potential attack proof of Azerbaijan having become a more important battlefield of the Iranian-Israeli 'secret war'?

This article shall provide background about recent events in Azerbaijan and these events' links to both Israel and Iran. It shall then touch upon the tension between Iran and Azerbaijan vis a vis Iranian Azerbaijanis. Furthermore, the foreign policies of all three nations to one another shall be reviewed and assessed in terms of relevance to the current tension between Iran and Azerbaijan and Iran and Israel, respectively. Finally, we shall focus on the external position of the U.S. on a potential Israeli attack upon Iran as well as the nature of Iranian retaliation should its nuclear facilities be attacked. The main goal of this text is to describe and explain recent events in Azerbaijan that have resulted from the Iranian and Israeli power clashes in this South Caucasus republic. This article shall analyse the positions and attitudes of Azerbaijan, Iran and Israel in context of the Iran-Israel secret war.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Iranian Azerbaijanis

The tension between Iran and Azerbaijan has been noticeable since the beginning of 1990s following Azerbaijan's declaration of independence. This tension is due to Iranian fear of possible irredentist tendencies of Iranian Azerbaijanis, Iran's largest ethnic minority who constitute about a quarter of Iran's multi-ethnic population of

approximately 73-million. Although Iranian Azerbaijanis, a Turcophone community inhabiting the northwest of the county along the borders with the Republic of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Turkey, are well-integrated into Iranian society, with a very high number of them holding important roles in the political, economic, military and cultural elite of Iran<sup>2</sup>, they still feel frustrated by Persian dominance in Iran, as they lack basic ethno-linguistic rights. For instance, despite the constitution of the Islamic Republic, the teaching of Azerbaijani Turkish is prohibited in schools across the country and TV and radio broadcasting in this language is also confined to a minimum. Iranian Azerbaijanis who regularly participate in protests aimed at gaining more ethno-linguistic and cultural rights regularly face mistreatment at the hands of Iranian authorities, for the latter suspect them of irredentist claims. According to Iranian Azerbaijanis, in their pursuit of the nationalist line established in the Pahlavi period, authorities in Iran tend to carry out fierce assimilatory policies toward Azerbaijanis which deny them their distinct identity. Persian nationalism as a leading ideology in Iran has undermined the rights of ethnic minorities, including those of the Iranian Azerbaijanis. Iranian concern over the independence of neighbouring Azerbaijan and former Azerbaijani President Abulfas Elchibey's pan-Turkic calls for Azerbaijan's reunification has prompted continued discrimination against Iranian Azerbaijanis (Souleimanov, 2006).

Modern day examples of such discrimination include the 2006 "Cartoon Crisis" and the current Urmia Crisis. On May 12, 2006, an Iranian state-run newspaper published a cartoon comparing Iranian Azerbaijanis to cockroaches and inciting a huge outcry among the Iranian Azerbaijanis population who demanded a formal apology by the government and also voiced their desire for ethnic autonomy and legalization of the Azeri language in the public sector. Iranian authorities responded to these demonstrations with extreme force, killing tens of Azerbaijani protestors. Till today, no formal apology was made by the Iranian government.

Additionally, the shrinking of Lake Urmia, which lies between East and West Azerbaijan, a region in Iran predominately inhabited by ethnic Azerbaijani Turks, has threatened the livelihood of this region's population. The UNEP Global Environmental Alert Services noted that the gradual disappearance of Lake Urmia is due to the "construction of dams and diversion of surface water for agriculture..." by the Iranian government (UNEP, 2012). In 2011, a round of protests by Iranian Azerbaijanis commenced calling upon the Iranian government to address the gradual disappearance of the lake. Iranian authorities responded with mass arrests of protestors. The Center for Climate and Security claims that a continued dissipation of the lake may eventually force much of the Azerbaijani population in this region to immigrate elsewhere (Femia; Werrell, 2012). These events portray the increased strength of Azerbaijani nationalism and Iranian authorities' concern over the increased strength of this minority.

Moreover, thousands of Iranian Azerbaijanis frequently travel to Turkey for both work and recreation and have, thereby, been affected by the strength of Turkish nationalism and its developed sense of pan-Turkic solidarity with both Azerbaijanis and representatives of other Turkic ethnicities. Iranian Azerbaijanis have also come to view Turkey, in comparison to Iran, as a much more modern, free and developed state. Turkish satellite broadcasting, with its rich menu of entertaining programs, has also entered the homes of ordinary Iranian Azerbaijanis, contributing to the improvement of their ethno-linguistic self-perception (Souleimanov, 2010). As compared to Turkey, Azerbaijan is a much weaker rival of Iran, so it is easier for Iran to compete with it.

## **2.2. Relations between Iran and Azerbaijan**

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Even though the declared policy of Iran towards Azerbaijan is the strengthening of good relations between these two countries (Fars News Agency, 2012a), in reality, Iran has been trying to weaken its northern neighbour for the past two decades. During the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Iran silently supported Christian Armenia against its Shia Azerbaijani opponent (Sultanova, 2012). In the case of the status of the Caspian Sea and exploitation of natural resources, Iran has allied with Russia in order to make Azerbaijan's position more difficult (or, accordingly, to improve its own position). Furthermore, Iran periodically warns Azerbaijan against orientation towards United States or Israel through the use of unarticulated threats and the emphasis on serious consequences for Azerbaijan should it pose any threat to Iran (Fars News Agency, 2012b). In turn, Azerbaijani authorities point at Iran's close ties with Armenia, a country that, according to Baku, has occupied one fifth of Azerbaijan's territory following the latter's defeat in the Nagorno-Karabakh war.

Another element (though less distinct) of relations between Azerbaijan and Iran is the export of religion from the Islamic Republic of Iran to the secular post-Soviet republic of Azerbaijan. Tehran's method of religion exportation was quite straightforward: to place as many Azerbaijani mosques as possible under the control of Iranian mullahs. In these mosques, radical Islamist ideas which undermine the secular statehood of Azerbaijan are disseminated. In the last decade, the Islamic party of Azerbaijan — heavily funded by Iran — has received growing support from Azerbaijani believers. However, these efforts of Tehran have been impeded by the predominantly secular nature of Azerbaijani society and the government's nationalist/patriotic campaign. Thus, it may be presumed that, in the short term, the "Islamization" of the local society is likely to fail (Ditrych; Souleimanov, 2007).

## **2.3. Relations between Israel and Iran**

During the time of the Shah, relations between Israel and Iran had been tolerable, with Iran being the second Muslim nation to recognize Israel as a state. The close ties between these two countries broke down following the Islamic Revolution in Iran led by Khomeini. Many factors including the belief that Iran sponsors terrorist groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas have contributed to this deterioration in ties (Bruno, 2012). These ties have further deteriorated since Ahmadinejad's anti-Zionist rhetoric. In his speech at the 'World without Zionism Conference' in 2005, Ahmadinejad proclaimed:

Our dear Imam said that the occupying regime must be wiped off the map and this was a very wise statement... I have no doubt that the new wave that has started in Palestine, and we witness it in the Islamic world too, will eliminate this disgraceful stain from the Islamic world. (Fathi, 2005)

In response to this statement, Israel implored that Iran be expelled from the United Nations and President Shimon Peres noted that, "The president of Iran should remember that Iran can also be wiped off the map." (Dominican Today, 2006)

## **2.4. Relations between Israel and Azerbaijan**

Israel and Azerbaijan have historically had very good relations. Azerbaijan has attempted to profile itself as an important partner of Israel in the post-Soviet region, especially in the South Caucasus. For Israel, an important component of Israeli-Azerbaijani relations is that there have never been cases of anti-Judaism or anti-Semitism in Azerbaijan. Despite the 1970s departure of about 50,000 Jews who left the country due to the Helsinki Accords,

there still remains a group (estimated at about 12,000) of so-called “Mountain Jews” in Azerbaijan who live in peace and prosperity (Lerner, 2008). Also, the highly secular nature of the Azerbaijani regime and society, its general lack of religious fundamentalism and local elites’ orientation toward the West (especially toward United States) encourage a pro-Israel attitude among many Azerbaijanis. This Azerbaijani position is extremely significant, especially in at time when Turkish-Israeli relations are worsening. In describing the importance of the alliance between Azerbaijan and Israel, Binyamin Ben Eliezer, the former chief of the Israeli Ministry of Defence and a current member of the Knesset, stated: “Azerbaijan-Israel relations are so firm and deep that the outside factors cannot affect it”. He also mentioned that “Azerbaijan-Israel relations are so reliable that it will not be affected by the (Israeli) tensions with Turkey.” (News.Az, 2011)

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### 3. Recent events in Azerbaijan

January events in Azerbaijan drew attention to the South Caucasus as a possible battlefield of Iranian-Israeli rivalry. According to Azerbaijan’s Ministry of National Security, Rasim Aliyev, Ali Huseynov and Balagardash Dadashov, who are wanted for banditry and kidnapping, had planned attacks upon the Israeli ambassador in Baku and upon other Jewish targets (Azernews, 2012). They smuggled firearms, munitions and explosives to Azerbaijan with the purpose of committing terrorist attacks. According to Azerbaijani authorities, Balagardash Dadashov had contacts with Iranian intelligence agencies and received about \$150,000 in weapons and other needed equipment from Iran (The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 2012). As a result of immediate preventive measures taken by the Azerbaijani Ministry of National Security, Rasim Aliyev, Ali Huseynov and Balagardash Dadashov were detained and their planned attack did not come to fruition. Their arms, ammunition and explosives were found hidden on the 150 km Baku-Astara highway which passes through the Bilasuvar region (APA-Baku, 2012). The main targets of their planned attack were Israeli ambassador Michael Lotem, Rabbi Shneur Segal and Rabbi Mati Lewis. Both rabbis were working in Baku’s biggest synagogue and at an affiliated Jewish religious school. The three suspects seem to be members of what is believed to be the Azerbaijani cell of Hezbollah, a militant Shiite organization and Iran’s “terror proxy” in the Middle East. Some sources further speculate that conspirators had also been instructed by Iranian bodies to assassinate Gaby Ashkenazi, the former chief of the Israeli Defence Forces, who was scheduled to visit the Azerbaijani capital in later months (UPI.com, 2012). Israeli authorities have voiced considerable concern over the planned attacks, leaving some observers to infer that Mossad officers might have been involved in foiling the assassinations in Baku (Pfeffer, 2012). Intriguingly, this was not the first attempt at assassinating Jewish – or Israeli – persons in Azerbaijan. In 2008, authorities foiled a plan by Ali Karaki and Ali Najmeddin to bomb the Israeli embassy in Baku. Despite being given long-term sentences in Azerbaijan, Ali Karaki and Ali Najmeddin, both Lebanese Shiites affiliated with Hezbollah, along with 12 Iranian nationals were unexpectedly released in August 2010 and were deported to Iran following increased pressure from Teheran authorities (Souleimanov, 2012).

Only two months after this recent anti-terrorist crackdown in Baku, the Ministry of National Security of Azerbaijan accused and detained 22 Azerbaijani citizens for spying and treason against the sovereignty and state security of the Republic of Azerbaijan. According to the Ministry, these citizens had secretly collaborated with the special services of the Iranian Revolution Guard Corps and had been instructed by Iranian officers to spy, collect and deliver information to representatives of the Revolutionary Guards

(Turkish Weekly, 2012). This Iranian network has been operating in Azerbaijan since the end of the 1990s, with one of its main goals being the sabotage and perpetration of terror attacks against the embassies, representatives and organizations of the United States, Israel and other Western countries in Baku (Ministry of National Security of Azerbaijan Republic, 2012). Thus, this move by Azerbaijani authorities can be interpreted as retaliation for Iranian intelligence and terror activities directed at Azerbaijan and as a clear sign of worsening relations between Azerbaijan and Iran.

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#### **4. Recent developments between Iran and Azerbaijan**

Most recently, Iran has expressed suspicion that Azerbaijan has provided the United States with territory for the purpose of reconnaissance missions inside of Iran. Ali Larijani, the former secretary of Iran's National Security Council and the current Speaker of Parliament, has stated "reconnaissance units are acting in Azerbaijan [and] their activity is aimed against the Islamic Republic of Iran." He also stressed that if Azerbaijani territory would be used as a base for a military attack against Iran, Tehran would retaliate by targeting the BTC pipeline and other strategic energy facilities in Azerbaijan (Ziyadov, 2006).

Due to many such speculations and Iranian distrust that Azerbaijan would remain neutral in possible future conflict, Novruz Mamedov, the 2005 head of the Azerbaijani presidential administration's Department of International Affairs, has said that Azerbaijan would not allow the United States to build bases within Azerbaijani territory and would not assist any type of attack against Iran (Caspian Weekly, 2008). This statement was based on the 2005 Tehran-Baku Non-Aggression Pact which commits both sides to not permitting a third country to set up a military base on their soil in pursuit of a military strike on the other (Turkish Weekly, 2005). Both countries have referred to this pact in an attempt to demonstrate their will for a peaceful partnership.

Even during the Azerbaijan-Iran crisis, that resulted from the discovery of assassination attempts and detainment of 22 alleged Iranian spies on Azerbaijani soil, Baku officials still insisted on not using its territory as a basis for others to carry out attacks against Iran. Vladimir Timoshenko, a senior Azeri military expert and a former parliament member, stated that "The government of Azerbaijan will never agree to use the republic's territory against Iran "...even if the Americans promise us to return Karabakh....Notice that because of the respect for the neighbourly relations with Iran, Azerbaijan for 20 years has not opened its embassy in Israel," he added (Fars News Agency, 2012c).

Certainly, a secular Azerbaijan with moderate religious inhabitants is compatible to the Israeli endeavour to establish a close alliance with an Islamic ally in this region. This compatibility is one of the reasons why Iran has been fervently attempting to increase religious radicalism in Azerbaijan.

#### **5. Recent developments between Iran and Israel**

In light of Iran's alleged support of Hezbollah and Hamas and Ahmadinejad's rhetoric, Iran's nuclear program has deeply unsettled Israeli authorities, as many have come to fear nuclear attack upon Israel. In 2007, former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon claimed "Israel — and not only Israel — cannot accept a nuclear Iran. We have the ability to deal with this and we're making all the necessary preparations to be ready for such a situation." (News Trust, 2005)

Not only is the question of whether or not Israel is preparing for a strike upon Iran's nuclear facilities highly ambiguous, the idea of such a strike in and of itself is highly

contested within Israel. Former Mossad chief, Meir Dagan has claimed that striking Iran would be a “stupid” idea (Haaretz, 2011). Still, Israel’s close ties with Azerbaijan and its military provision to Azerbaijan have led many to point out that Israel may be preparing for an attack upon Iran’s nuclear facilities. (Jones, 2012)

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## 6. Recent developments between Israel and Azerbaijan

Recently, Israel has intensified its activism in the South Caucasus, a development that has been conditioned by a number of factors. First, the region is host to a relatively ample Jewish community in Georgia and in Azerbaijan, where the number of citizens adhering to the Jewish religion has tripled over the last fifteen years, in itself an unprecedented phenomenon in the post-Soviet space<sup>3</sup>. Second, the region still has not entirely realized its potential of becoming an important oil and natural gas exporter and a transit hub that would link the Caspian with global markets. As of yet, a large percentage of Israel’s oil inflow comes from Azerbaijan. Last but not least, Israel’s interest in the region has increased in the context of a fiercely debated (and considerably prognosticated by some) attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities and the necessity to safeguard overland access to the Islamic Republic of Iran in case of such an attack (Souleimanov, 2006)

According to Bourttman (2006), security relations between Azerbaijan and Israel commenced after the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the early 1990s when Azerbaijan reached out to Israel for help in rebuilding its military. Israeli defence firms obliged, selling Azerbaijan advanced aviation, antitank, artillery and anti-infantry weapon systems. They also built and guarded the fence around Baku’s international airport as well as monitored and helped protect Azerbaijan’s energy infrastructure. Israeli intelligence operatives have helped collect human intelligence about extremist Islamist organizations in the region and currently monitor the troop deployments of Azerbaijan’s neighbours—especially Iran. The most expressive example of Azerbaijan-Israel security cooperation is the recent 1.6 billion dollar arms deal between these two countries that includes the sale of drones as well as anti-aircraft and missile defence systems to Azerbaijan (Haaretz.com, 2012). The intelligence company Stratfor (2012) assumes that it is difficult to believe that the United States and Israel are not coordinating their activities in the Caucasus. The sale of weapons to Azerbaijan vexes Iran and Israel is unlikely to undercut Washington’s hard-line position vis-à-vis Tehran. Furthermore, the Israeli sale of weapons to Azerbaijan not only means immediate weapon provision to Baku, but also implies that further supplies will be provided as needed. Israel’s actions deliver a message to Iran and reassures Azerbaijan. Public arms sales represent a political commitment on the part of Israel, which Baku will interpret as an implied U.S. obligation.

This arms deal makes Iran suspicious of its northern neighbour. Cooperation between Israel and Azerbaijan in security matters presents a security risk for Iran. Improvement of Azerbaijani anti-aircraft and missile defence systems can evoke an assumption by Tehran that Baku is preparing to counter any possible Iranian retaliation upon Azerbaijani territory. Such retaliation by Iran may come should Israel (or the United States) attack Iran using Azerbaijani airfields or airspace. According to Mark Perry, U.S. intelligence and diplomatic officials believe that Israel has gained access to Azerbaijani airbases through a series of quiet political and military understandings. Access to such airfields is vital for Israel, because it would mean that Israeli F-15I and F-16I fighter-bombers would not have to refuel mid-flight should they engage in a strike upon Iran’s nuclear facilities, but could simply continue north and land in Azerbaijan. This factor does not, of course, mean Israelis will definitely attack Iran; it means that Israelis would be capable of carrying out an attack

without the need for American logistical aid. Perry also mentions that even if Israeli jets do not land in Azerbaijan, access to Azeri airfields holds a number of other advantages for the Israel Defence Forces. The airfields not only contain facilities that may service fighter-bombers, but in the days preceding a strike, Israel could place helicopter units there for the purpose of future search and rescue missions (Perry, 2012).

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### **7. The U.S. position on Israel's potential attack**

The US attitude toward a potential Israeli attack on Iran using Azerbaijan's territory remains unclear. Relations between the Obama administration and Netanyahu's government are not as good as they were during George W. Bush's presidency. Although Obama is not an obvious supporter of solving Iran's nuclear program by military force, he admitted to the Chinese president Hu Jintao that the United States would not be able to keep Israel from attacking Iranian nuclear installations for much longer (Haaretz.com, 2009). Indeed, the Obama administration have only small leverage to prevent Israel from attacking Iran especially if, due to access to Azerbaijani airfields, Israel does not require American logistic support for realizing an air raid against Iranian nuclear facilities. Former UN Ambassador and pro-Israeli oriented politician John Bolton accused the Obama administration of pressuring the Israeli government to not launch an attack on Iran. Bolton added that recent intelligence leaks by the administration about Israel-Azerbaijan military cooperation and Azerbaijani airfields could hurt Israel's chances of successfully knocking out Iran's nuclear facilities. He stated, "Releasing this information, so that the Iranians now know about it, takes away a potentially very powerful mode of attack that hitherto the Israelis have been able to keep secret." (Patten, 2012)

### **8. The nature of possible Iranian retaliation**

Iranian retaliation to such an Israeli act would probably take the form of a direct military strike against Israel (the attacker) or Azerbaijan (the supporter). It would probably also take the form of covert and asymmetrical warfare by striking Israeli (and Azerbaijani) targets all over the world rather than sticking to overt air or missile attack. Iran has demonstrated its strategy and ability in recent cases of foiled Iranian bombs plots in Georgia and Azerbaijan and also through recent attacks in India and Thailand presumed to have been carried out by Iranian suspects.

Wayne Merry, a former US State Department official, has said to Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty that due to the proximity of Georgia and Azerbaijan to Iran and these countries' visa-free travel agreements with Iran, Israeli facilities in Georgia and Azerbaijan are among Tehran's most readily "available" targets. He also expressed his opinion that this situation is "a low-level asymmetric conflict between intelligence services — Iranian and Israeli — in which the territory and sovereignty of other countries are not well-respected." (Whitmore, 2012). Thus, Iran's attempts to attack Israeli targets abroad may foreshadow a possible future consequence should Israel attack nuclear (and other) targets of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

### **9. Conclusion**

Recent events in Azerbaijan involving assassination attempts and attacks against Israeli and Jewish targets appear to be linked to the tension of two foreign powers — Israel and Iran — and to the political orientation of Azerbaijan itself. Baku's role as a secular Muslim bastion of pro-Western forces in this turbulent region has been boosted, as the crucial Azerbaijan-Israeli axis has been further strengthened. This is a rather favourable

development for Azerbaijan that lacks strong allies yet finds itself in a situation of latent conflict with at least two of its immediate neighbours, Iran and Armenia. Unless Baku yields to Tehran's far-fetched requirements such as (for example) eliminating the presence of Western energy companies in the Caspian and cutting ties with Israel, Azerbaijan's unstable relations with hostile Iran are too serious for it to afford a lone standoff with Iran.

In fact, over the past two decades, Iran has been trying to weaken Azerbaijan due to fear of its influence over the Iranian Azerbaijani minority and increased orientation toward Israel and the United States. Besides supporting the Armenian side in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Iran has allied with Russia (against Azerbaijan) on the issue of the Caspian Sea status and exploitation of natural resources and has tried to export religion from Iran to Azerbaijan. Relations between Israel and Iran are also poor, having soured over alleged Iranian support of Hamas and Hezbollah, anti-Israel rhetoric and Israeli fear over the Iranian nuclear program. Israel and Iran, however, hold good relations, enabling Israel to ensure a presence in the South Caucasus in case of an attack on Iran and an ample oil supply from Azerbaijan; and allowing Azerbaijan to profit from military aid from Israel. Although U.S. officials claim they cannot deter a potential attack by Israel on Iran, provision of weapons to Azerbaijan and support of sanctions on Iran indicate a similar ideological position to Israel on the threat of Iran's nuclear program.

As has already been witnessed in the foiled attacks in Azerbaijan as well as upon facilities in Georgia, should Iranian facilities be attacked, Iran's retaliation would most likely take the form of direct attacks on a global scale. The world has been reminded of an anti-Jewish – and prospectively also anti-Western – Islamist network operating in Azerbaijan that is capable of carrying out attacks on Iran's enemies. It would seem that newly imposed sanctions by the USA and key EU countries on oil exports from Iran (reducing Azerbaijan's role as a stable energy supplier and a transit country) and the existence of militant Islamist groups in Azerbaijan may be factors that deter prospective plans of transforming Azerbaijani soil into a base from which a potential attack may be carried out against Iran. However, following the recent deterioration of Israel's relations with Turkey and the consequent inability of Israel to utilize Turkish soil for Israeli intelligence activities, relations with Azerbaijan, considered by Israel to be a friendly nation with a highly contested relation with Iran, becomes ever more significant to Israel. Recently, the Israeli-Iranian rivalry has intensified and recent liquidations of Iranian nuclear scientists on Iranian soil are believed by some to have been instigated by Israeli intelligence. Hence, due to Azerbaijan's key geographical location, the existence of a strong Azerbaijani minority with increasingly active pro-separatist and anti-Iranian sentiments and Israel's increased military support to Azerbaijan, one might infer that should relations between Israel and Iran deteriorate further, Azerbaijan may become an area of Israeli-Iranian confrontation.

(Submitted on September 2012)

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**Quote this article**

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**Notes**

1. This study was carried out in the framework of the Research Project of the Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University in Prague, entitled P17 Science on Society, Politics, and Media.
2. For instance, the supreme leader of the Islamic Republic ayatollah Ali Khamenei and last year's key reformist presidential candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi are both of Azerbaijani origin.
3. Jewish communities in both countries consist of "ethnic" Jews of both Ashkenazi and Sephardim as well as the Tat minority, an Iranian-speaking population adhering predominantly to the Jewish religion in eastern and northern Azerbaijan that constitute a majority of the country's Jewish community.

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