

# Unlikely Alliances: How the Wars in Karabakh And Gaza Shape Northwest Asian Security

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## Abstract

This study analyzes how ongoing conflicts in the Levant and the post-Soviet South Caucasus have upset the balance of relationships among Armenia, Azerbaijan, Iran, Israel, Turkey, and Russia—and how this could escalate into a major, cross-regional war. Azerbaijan's military victories of 2020 and 2023 over the Armenia-occupied, separatist republic of Nagorno-Karabakh have antagonized Iran, which has seen these gains, coupled with Baku's increasingly revanchist rhetoric, as a major threat to regional security. With Armenia left on its own by its Russian ally, and with Turkey's and Israel's backing of Azerbaijan, the Gaza war has driven Iran to see Baku as a dangerous "Israeli asset." However, the Palestine conflict has also sparked a rift between Turkey and Israel, throwing into question Baku's strength. If the militarist rhetoric of Azerbaijani elites leads the state to invade its weakened neighbor Armenia, this will increase the potential for a military confrontation between the two Shiite nations of Azerbaijan and Iran, with Armenia, Turkey, Israel, and Russia likely to be dragged in.

How have the armed conflicts in Karabakh and the Gaza Strip reshaped the security architecture of Northwest Asia? This article seeks to explore the major shifts in the two seemingly distant regions of the post-Soviet South Caucasus and the Middle East, and to examine the interconnections among Armenia, Azerbaijan, Iran, Israel, Turkey, and Russia. The analysis reveals

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the dynamics of unlikely alliances, including ties between Azerbaijan and Israel, and between Iran and Armenia; the simultaneous strains between Turkey and Israel; and Russia's increasing detachment from Armenia as it focuses on Ukraine.

We may be witnessing major shifts in balances of power that will reshape the security architecture of West Asia. Azerbaijan's September 2023 military victory in Karabakh and Israel's ongoing ground operation in Gaza to eradicate Hamas have dramatically polarized the broader region, with pro-Palestinian Turkey's relations with Israel hitting a new low, Russia's seemingly leaving the South Caucasus, and Iran's assuming increasingly assertive policies toward Israel's key Muslim partner, Azerbaijan. Depending on whether and to what extent the Gaza war escalates into a major international crisis involving Israel, Iran, Turkey, and the West, Azerbaijan might become yet another neuralgic spot on the map of West Asia. With Tehran and Baku facing unprecedented enmity, an escalation of conflict between Israel and Iran in the Levant or elsewhere—or an Azerbaijani invasion of Armenia—could trigger a military conflict between Iran and Azerbaijan, with the potential of sparking a dangerous regional war.

In the South Caucasus, Russia's influence has continued to fade as its peacekeeping force, deployed in the aftermath of the Second Karabakh War of 2020, is pulling out after the mass exodus of Karabakh's ethnic-Armenian population into Armenia. Moscow's unwillingness or incapacity to provide support to Armenia, while an increasingly confident Azerbaijan has consolidated the backing of Turkey and Israel, has frustrated Armenian society and prompted Yerevan to seek alternative partners, including the West. Russia's surprising withdrawal from the South Caucasus prompted its long-time rivals Turkey and Iran to engage more assertively in this strategic crossroads.

For Ankara, Baku's military successes and restoration of territorial integrity have revived the idea of the Turkic fraternity between the two states. For Israel, oil-rich Azerbaijan has, since its establishment as an independent state in the early 1990s, been seen as a friendly Muslim nation that can supply oil and act as a bulwark against Iran, of which both have long been suspicious. Azerbaijan's takeover of Karabakh has further exacerbated Iran's concerns over the existence, to the northwest of its own Turkic-majority border region, of a unified and strong Turkic nation with ties not just to Turkey and Israel, but also to the West. However, Ankara's strident criticism of the Gaza war has imperiled the *détente* between Turkey and Israel, Azerbaijan's key strategic partners, that Baku had helped to mediate.

An expansion of war in or around the Levant holds the potential to further aggravate Azerbaijan's relations with the Islamic Republic. Baku's increasingly militarist rhetoric since its victory in Karabakh has led Tehran to view its neighbor as a dangerous, revanchist force in the region and a "Zionist asset." Escalation involving Iranian proxies, or a direct military confrontation between Israel and Iran, may create a dilemma for Turkey: If Iran attacks Azerbaijan as a soft, pro-Israel target, should Ankara defend its Turkic-majority partner or hold back due to its animus toward the Jewish state? In turn, such a military confrontation might compel Israel to act, not least because a large share of its oil comes from Azerbaijan.

This article evaluates the recent shifts in the security architecture of Northwest Asia, especially Azerbaijan's evolving relations with key powers. It first offers an overview of the last three decades of regional politics, focusing on Baku's interactions with Turkey, Iran, and Israel. Second, it analyzes the post-September 2023 landscape, centering on the power shifts within the unlikely alliances: Azerbaijan, Israel, and Turkey, and Armenia, Iran, and Russia. The article shows that violent conflicts in the Levant and the South Caucasus have triggered shifts in the balances of power, and that the potential for cross-regional war has increased. Most important, if Israel and

Iran, or Iran and Azerbaijan, engage in a direct military conflict, Armenia, Turkey, and Russia could be dragged in, imperiling the security of Northwest Asia.

## TURKEY'S UNLIKELY ALLIANCE WITH AZERBAIJAN

The dissolution of the USSR in 1991 opened unexpected opportunities for Turkey, an emerging regional power. In the post-Soviet South—the South Caucasus and Central Asia—five independent, Turkic-majority nations emerged, leading to the revival of pan-ethnic nostalgia. However, political and economic challenges diminished the romanticism of Turkic confederation, yielding to sober diplomatic, economic, and cultural cooperation.<sup>1</sup> Calls for establishing a political union of Turkic states, once popular among some intellectual elites in Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, stumbled upon the personal agendas of regional leaders clearly interested in consolidating their regimes. In addition, Moscow dramatically increased its political, economic, and military role in its post-Soviet backyard, which Ankara lacked the resources to match. The elites of post-Soviet Azerbaijan—a country linguistically, culturally, and geographically closest to Turkey of the five newly independent Turkic-majority nations—have since the early 1990s regarded Turkey as an “organic” ally whose assistance would allow Baku to strengthen its political and economic independence.<sup>2</sup> While Ankara did provide substantial diplomatic support to Baku in the early years of independence, Turkish governments sought to stay out of the First Karabakh War of 1992–94, largely to avoid direct military confrontation with Russia, Armenia’s key ally.<sup>3</sup>

Following Azerbaijan’s military defeat in that conflict, relations between Ankara and Baku shifted to the economic and energy domains. Despite multiple obstacles created by Moscow and Tehran, and thanks to Turkish and American backing, strategic oil and natural-gas pipelines were built and became operational by the early 2000s, connecting Azerbaijan’s Caspian offshore fields via Georgia and Turkey with Western markets. Bypassing Russia, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and South Caucasus pipelines have generated enormous revenues for landlocked Azerbaijan, helping it escape geographic and political isolation and ensuring Western capital and diplomatic attention.<sup>4</sup>

From 1994 to 2023, Turkey’s political support was crucial for Azerbaijan, particularly on the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh and seven adjacent provinces occupied by Armenian forces. Turkey also opened its military academies to Azerbaijani students, helping to produce a new generation of officers educated according to the highest NATO standards. Reflecting on the deepening political and economic ties between Ankara and Baku, the elites of both countries extolled the notion of “one nation, two states” to showcase their cultural affinities.<sup>5</sup> However, still unwilling to get involved in Azerbaijan’s lingering military standoff with Russia-allied Armenia, Ankara refrained

<sup>1</sup> Joshua W. Walker, “Turkey and the Post-Soviet States: A New Way Forward,” *Insight Turkey* 7, no. 4 (2005): 13–19.

<sup>2</sup> Emil Souleimanov, *Understanding ethnopolitical conflict: Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia wars reconsidered* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 136–137.

<sup>3</sup> Svante E. Cornell, “Turkey and the Conflict in Nagorno Karabakh: A Delicate Balance,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 34, no. 1 (1998): 51–72.

<sup>4</sup> Gawdat Bahgat, “Pipeline Diplomacy: The Geopolitics of the Caspian Sea Region,” *International Studies Perspectives* 3, no. 3 (2002): 310–327.

<sup>5</sup> Murad Ismayilov and Norman A. Graham, eds., *Turkish-Azerbaijani Relations: One Nation—Two States?* (London: Routledge, 2016).

from establishing a formal military alliance with its Turkic-majority counterpart, even though this was considered by many in Azerbaijan a historical necessity to help counter Russia's and Iran's domination of the South Caucasus and their support for Armenia.

By the mid-2010s, Ankara had grown far less reluctant to intervene in the region. Given increasing Armenian-Azerbaijani confrontation over Karabakh and other provinces, as well as Armenia's efforts to press for international recognition of alleged genocide in Ottoman Anatolia, the government of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan provided support for Baku's military operations in 2016 and 2020. And, in 2022 alone, according to the Azerbaijani Ministry of Defense, more than 20 joint military exercises were held between the two countries.<sup>6</sup> These drills were intended "to ensure combat interoperability, improve management, exchange experience, and increase military personnel's professionalism during the troops' interaction," the ministry said.<sup>7</sup> The following analysis shows that Turkey's support—along with its purchases of technologically advanced military equipment from Israel—has played an important role in Azerbaijan's victory over Armenian forces in the Second Karabakh War.

## IRAN-ARMENIA ALLIANCE IS SQUEEZED

The establishment of independent states in the former Soviet Union turned Iran's sleepy northern neighborhood of the South Caucasus and Central Asia into a geopolitical puzzle. Of those emergent post-Soviet nations, Azerbaijan posed the greatest challenge.<sup>8</sup> Intellectuals and politicians alike have urged Tehran to project its influence into Azerbaijan's territories, once part of greater Iran. Cultural and historical considerations aside, political concerns have dominated the thinking of Iranian strategists. The country's northwestern provinces of West Azerbaijan and East Azerbaijan are inhabited by a significant Turkophone population. Iranian Azerbaijanis are Iran's second largest ethnic community and largest minority group, numbering more than 20 million—double their ethnic counterparts in post-Soviet, Caucasian, or northern Azerbaijan.

The establishment of an independent, secular, pro-Western Azerbaijani state to the northwest, coupled with mounting pan-Turkic sentiment, raised concerns among Iranian elites. They feared efforts by external powers to stir up irredentism among Iranian Azerbaijanis.<sup>9</sup> Baku's increasingly close ties with Turkey, and especially with enemies like the United States and Israel, further deepened Tehran's concerns. In an ironic turn, the Islamic theocracy sided with Christian-majority Russia and Armenia in the latter's wars with fellow Shiite Azerbaijan, effectively cementing the first "unlikely alliance" in the South Caucasus. Following Azerbaijan's military defeat in the First Karabakh War in 1994, Iran aligned itself with Russia to halt the exploration and transit of Azerbaijan's Caspian energy resources to Western markets and prevent the establishment of a

<sup>6</sup> Javid Valiyev, "Azerbaijan-Türkiye military cooperation: one nation, one army," Air Center, December 23, 2022, <https://aircenter.az/en/single/azerbaijan-turkiye-military-cooperation-one-nation-one-army-1093>.

<sup>7</sup> Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan, "Activities of Azerbaijani and Turkish servicemen were highly evaluated at Mustafa Kemal Atatürk-2023 joint tactical exercises—VIDEO," October 24, 2023, <https://mod.gov.az/en/news/activities-of-azerbaijani-and-turkish-servicemen-were-highly-evaluated-at-mustafa-kemal-ataturk-2023-joint-tac-49885.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Emil Souleimanov and Ondrej Ditrych, "Iran and Azerbaijan: A Contested Neighborhood," *Middle East Policy* 14, no. 2 (2007): 101–116.

<sup>9</sup> Josef Kraus and Emil Souleimanov, "A Failed Comeback? Understanding Iranian Policies in the South Caucasus," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 18, no. 5 (2016): 448–464.

strong Western presence to its strategic northwest.<sup>10</sup> Tehran thus relied in its South Caucasus policies on an informal alliance with Armenia and Russia to make sure Azerbaijan was kept weak, divided, and isolated from the rest of the world. But this regional strategy had largely failed by 2023.

To project its influence into Azerbaijan, Iran has played the religion card. Azerbaijan, while a nominally Shiite-majority country, is among the least religious in the world, staunchly secular, and built on Turkic nationalism.<sup>11</sup> Tehran has nevertheless sought to back isolated segments of Azerbaijani society, especially radical, conservative, pro-Iranian Shiite clergy, to establish its social power base there. Iranian interference was most notorious during the 2015 riots in Nardaran, a township on the Absheron peninsula near Baku, where at least six were killed in clashes between Shiite worshippers and police.<sup>12</sup> Such efforts have been largely fruitless, though, with the pro-Iranian Shiite camp remaining socially isolated and incapable of stirring up tensions within the Azerbaijani mainstream. As well, Tehran has allegedly tried to stimulate separatism within the Talysh minority, an Iranian ethnic group inhabiting southeast Azerbaijan. This, too, has been in vain, with most Talysh people generally unwilling to follow the cultural emancipationist agenda of some of their representatives.<sup>13</sup>

Incapable of gaining a foothold in Azerbaijan, Tehran's elites largely relied on Moscow to ensure the status quo in the South Caucasus.<sup>14</sup> However, the Second Karabakh War of 2020 illustrated the limits of Iran's reliance on Russian power. The Azerbaijani military prevailed over joint Armenian forces in just 44 days, and Moscow chose to remain neutral. While Tehran has formally endorsed Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, it fears that the regional balance of power has shifted dramatically in Baku's favor.<sup>15</sup>

The gradual demise of Russia's influence and the increasingly confident engagements of Turkey and Israel with Azerbaijan have contributed to the mounting Iranian concerns about the future of the South Caucasus.<sup>16</sup> Baku's insistence on establishing the extraterritorial Zangezur corridor—a strip of land in southernmost Armenia along the Iranian-Armenian border that would link Azerbaijan proper with its western exclave of Nakhichevan—has even led Iran into an unprecedented demonstration of force. Following the Second Karabakh War, Iranian regular forces and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps carried out a series of high-level military drills near the

<sup>10</sup> Kamyar Mehdiyoun, "Ownership of Oil and Gas Resources in the Caspian Sea," *American Journal of International Law* 94, no. 1 (2000): 179–89; Maya Ehrmann, Josef Kraus, and Emil Souleimanov, "The Iran-Israel-Azerbaijan Triangle: Implications on Regional Security," *Revista Estudios Políticos* 4, no. 7 (2013): 215–228.

<sup>11</sup> Raoul Motika, "Islam in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan," *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 115 (2001): 111–124.

<sup>12</sup> Eldar Mamedov, "Azerbaijan: Examining the Source of Discontent in Nardaran," Eurasianet, December 8, 2015, <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-examining-the-source-of-discontent-in-nardaran>; Emil Souleimanov, "Azerbaijan, Islamism, and unrest in Nardaran," *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, December 27, 2023, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13316-azerbaijan-islamism-and-unrest-in-nardaran.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Idrak Abbasov, "Ethnic minority builds ties with Iran while declaring loyalty to government in Baku," Institute for War & Peace Reporting, July 12, 2007, <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/talysh-azerbaijan-look-south-and-north>.

<sup>14</sup> Alexander Yeo and Emil A. Souleimanov, "Iran-Azerbaijan Tensions and the Tehran Embassy Attack," *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, May 8, 2023, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13753-iran-azerbaijan-tensions-and-the-tehran-embassy-attack.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Elis Gjevori, "Iran: What are the implications of Azerbaijan's victory over Armenia?" Middle East Eye, October 11, 2023, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iran-azerbaijan-victory-over-armenia-implications>.

<sup>16</sup> Alex Vatanka, "Iran, Turkey, and the Future of the South Caucasus," Middle East Institute, May 4, 2002, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/iran-turkey-and-future-south-caucasus>.

Azerbaijani border. On one occasion, in December 2022, Turkey and Azerbaijan countered this Iranian demonstration with exercises of their own near the Islamic Republic.<sup>17</sup>

The tit-for-tat provocations were conducted at the diplomatic level, as well. Iran opened a consulate in Armenia's key southern province, Syunik, and top Iranian officials, including the minister of foreign relations, reiterated the importance of securing Armenia's territorial integrity—a direct swipe at Baku.<sup>18</sup> In January 2023, a gunman killed a security officer in an assault on Azerbaijan's embassy in Tehran, leading Azerbaijani officials to implicitly blame Iran for enabling the attack and trying to intimidate them. Four Iranian diplomats were subsequently expelled from Azerbaijan for reasons not specified, and Tehran soon expelled four Azerbaijani diplomats. By mid-2023, it was a full-fledged crisis.<sup>19</sup> The tensions were further aggravated that May when 32 members of the 120-member Israeli Knesset pledged support for the national aspirations of Iran's Azerbaijani minority.<sup>20</sup>

## ISRAEL'S AXIS WITH AZERBAIJAN AND TURKEY

Israel was second only to Turkey in recognizing Azerbaijan's independence, and Baku has developed cordial relations with the Jewish state. They have built their partnership around the legacy of Azerbaijan as a Muslim state without a history of antisemitism. Azerbaijan has for many centuries been home to the Mountain Jews, an ancient community residing in the country's northeast. In spite of large-scale, economically driven post-Soviet migration of Mountain Jews to Israel, Russia, and the United States, around 30,000 Mountain Jews remain, along with a smaller number of Ashkenazi and Georgian Jews, making Azerbaijan the Muslim nation with the largest Jewish population. Indeed, religious identity is a component of their interest in each other. Israel can tout friendly relations with a nominally Muslim country, while Azerbaijan points to its ties to Israel and the United States as demonstrating its standing as a modern Muslim state. It likely also sees advantage in collaborating with Israel and the Jewish diaspora to advance policy objectives in Washington through their lobbies.<sup>21</sup>

While historical and reputational factors have contributed to the relationship, Israel and Azerbaijan share two major strategic objectives. First, due to its complicated relations with key Arab producers of oil and natural gas, Israel has sought Azerbaijani oil. More than 40 percent of Israel's consumption is made up of Azerbaijani sources.<sup>22</sup> For Baku, shipping oil to Israel has been a viable option for diversifying its exports.

<sup>17</sup> Joshua Kucera, "Azerbaijan and Turkey in joint exercises on Iranian border," Eurasianet, December 7, 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-and-turkey-in-joint-military-exercises-on-iranian-border>.

<sup>18</sup> Maziar Motamedi, "Analysis: Will Azerbaijan-Iran tensions lead to war?" Al Jazeera, April 8, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/4/8/analysis-will-azerbaijan-iran-tensions-lead-to-war>.

<sup>19</sup> Reuters, "Iran expels four Azerbaijan diplomats in tit-for-tat move," May 5, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/iran-expels-four-azerbaijan-diplomats-tit-for-tat-move-2023-05-05>.

<sup>20</sup> Seth J. Frantzman, "Israeli MKs, Azeris in Iran and the complexities of the Middle East—analysis," *The Jerusalem Post*, May 2, 2023, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-741874>.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Swift, "Azerbaijan: Israel's Secret Muslim Friend," *The Jerusalem Post*, November 2, 2015, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/azerbaijan-israels-secret-muslim-friend-431810>.

<sup>22</sup> Zvi Bar'el, "Azerbaijan's Offensive on Nagorno-Karabakh Will Impact Israel's Diplomacy With Iran," *Haaretz*, October 1, 2023, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-10-01/ty-article/.premium/armenians-fleeing-nagorno-karabach-will-impact-israeli-diplomacy-in-the-region/0000018a-aa45-d12f-afbf-eb5532d40000>.

Second, and more important, the two states are committed to containing Iran. For Israel, Azerbaijan represents a foothold close to Iran's borders, allowing it to gather intelligence. While hard evidence is lacking, observers have pointed to advanced cooperation between the two states.<sup>23</sup> Iranian elites have on multiple occasions accused Baku of treacherous collaboration with the "Zionists." In an unprecedented move, Azerbaijan appointed its first-ever ambassador to Israel in 2023, a formal act it had refrained from for more than three decades to avoid antagonizing Muslim states, particularly Iran. This, too, sparked criticism in Tehran, with members of parliament warning, "The Muslims of the world will consider [Azerbaijanis] accomplices of the Zionist regime in the murder and crimes against the oppressed Palestinians."<sup>24</sup> A foreign affairs spokesman further declared in March 2023 that Iran "won't stay indifferent" to Israel's "united front" with Azerbaijan.<sup>25</sup> Baku's move also drew attention in the Palestinian territories, with Hamas urging it to stop formalizing relations with the Jewish state.<sup>26</sup>

In exchange, Azerbaijan has, over the last decade, become an important recipient of advanced weaponry and equipment from its partner. Around 70 percent of Azerbaijan's military equipment and most of its most advanced systems, including drones and missile defense, have been directly imported from Israel.<sup>27</sup> These supplies were instrumental to victory in the 2020 Karabakh war.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, purchases of Israeli equipment increased significantly on the eve of Azerbaijan's September 2023 military operation. This sparked an outcry in Armenia, with officials strongly condemning the Jewish state. "It's clear to us that Israel has an interest in keeping a military presence in Azerbaijan, using its territory to observe Iran," said one diplomat, Tigran Balayan.<sup>29</sup> The Armenian diaspora in the West also decried Israel's high-level military collaboration with Azerbaijan.

Despite the anger and frustration among Armenian communities worldwide over Israel's provision of weapons to their foe, Azerbaijanis have come to appreciate Israel's military support. One month after Azerbaijan opened an embassy in Tel Aviv in March 2023, Israel's foreign relations minister, Eli Cohen, visited Baku and spoke of forging a "united and strong front against

<sup>23</sup> Julia Frankel, "Israel's defense chief travels to Azerbaijan, reaffirming shared opposition to Iran," Associated Press, July 13, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/israel-azerbaijan-iran-nuclear-bomb-gallant-c1c6a84f5926e619ed543eb17a6b3406>. For an analysis of the bilateral relationship between Azerbaijan and Israel, see Emil Souleimanov, Maya Ehrmann, and Huseyn Aliyev, "Focused on Iran? Exploring the rationale behind the strategic relationship between Azerbaijan and Israel," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 14, no. 4 (2014): 471–488.

<sup>24</sup> Motamedi, "Analysis."

<sup>25</sup> Syed Zafar Mehdi, "Iran says 'won't be indifferent' to Israel's 'united front' with Azerbaijan," Anadolu Agency, March 31, 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/iran-says-wont-be-indifferent-to-israels-united-front-with-azerbaijan/2860368>.

<sup>26</sup> Middle East Monitor, " Hamas official urges Azerbaijan to stop normalisation with Israel," March 31, 2023, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230331-hamas-official-urges-azerbaijan-to-stop-normalisation-with-israel>.

<sup>27</sup> Seth J. Frantzman, "Did Azerbaijan's use of Israeli weapons make the war worse or better?" *The Jerusalem Post*, March 18, 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/international/did-azerbajians-use-of-israeli-weapons-make-the-war-worse-or-better-662442>.

<sup>28</sup> Brenda Shaffer, "Israel's Role in the Second Armenia-Azerbaijan War and Its Implications for the Future," *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, September 9, 2022, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/resources/pdf/220912Shaffer.pdf>.

<sup>29</sup> Isabel Debre, "Israeli arms quietly helped Azerbaijan retake Nagorno-Karabakh, to the dismay of region's Armenians," Associated Press, October 5, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/armenia-azerbaijan-nagorno-karabakh-weapons-israel-6814437bcd744acc1c4df0409a74406c>.

our common challenges.”<sup>30</sup> That fall, to celebrate victory in Karabakh, Azerbaijan’s cities hung Israeli flags alongside those of partners like Turkey and Pakistan. Crowds of Azerbaijanis took flowers to the Israeli embassy in Baku to honor the Israeli civilians killed and taken hostage by Hamas in early October 2023.

Since victory in the Second Karabakh War, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev has tried diligently to reconcile his key partners, Israel and Turkey.<sup>31</sup> Before Hamas’s brutal assault, Baku’s efforts paved the way for a historic reconciliation that had the potential to reshape the security architecture from Syria to Iraq and across the South Caucasus—particularly bad news for Iran, its proxies, and Hamas.<sup>32</sup> An Israeli-Turkish-Azerbaijani axis could have ensured Baku’s security in the face of challenges from Tehran and Moscow. Along with Israel’s rapprochement with key Arab nations through the Abraham Accords, Turkey’s partnership could have (re)created an axis that reshaped regional security, politics, and economics. However, the ongoing Gaza war has divided the potential bloc: Turkey has expressed full support not just for Palestinians but for Hamas, and Azerbaijan has cautiously sided with Israel.<sup>33</sup>

## POSTWAR GEOPOLITICAL SHIFTS

Azerbaijan’s September 2023 military operation in Karabakh and Hamas’s deadly invasion of southern Israel have caused major shifts in regional security. Tehran now faces challenges on several fronts, due to Azerbaijan’s gaining strength and the Palestine war’s potential to force a confrontation with Israel and the West, either directly or through proxies. Preoccupied with the full-scale military invasion of Ukraine, Russia’s departure from the South Caucasus has also forced Iran to take a more assertive stance toward the negative developments to its northwest. However, Turkey’s dispute with Israel has contributed to the unmaking of the informal Baku-Ankara-Tel Aviv triangle. With the prospect of a military confrontation between Iran and Azerbaijan rising, Ankara must choose between military support for Baku—and sparking a conflict with the still-powerful Islamic Republic—or a potential loss of reputation in Azerbaijan and the greater Turkic world.

What appears to be Azerbaijan’s military victory over Armenia, coupled with the withdrawal of Russia’s peacekeeping force from Karabakh, has again raised concerns in Iran. Baku’s insistence on establishing the extraterritorial Zangezur corridor, over which Yerevan would effectively have no authority, would strip Iran of control over a common border with Armenia.<sup>34</sup> With both Yerevan and Tehran interested in retaining control over this common border, they have

<sup>30</sup> The Cradle, “Israel, Azerbaijan seek strong front against common challenges,” April 18, 2023, <https://new.thecradle.co/articles/israel-azerbaijan-seek-strong-front-against-common-challenges>.

<sup>31</sup> Efgan Nifti and Jeremy Cohen, “Mutual Friends: Azerbaijan Seeks to Promote Reconciliation Between Israel and Turkey,” Caspian Policy Center, December 24, 2020, <https://www.caspianpolicy.org/research/security-and-politics-program-spp/mutual-friends-azerbaijan-seeks-to-promote-reconciliation-between-israel-and-turkey>.

<sup>32</sup> James Jeffrey, “How Turkey-Israel reconciliation will reshape the Middle East,” The Hill, September 9, 2023, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/4228775-what-turkey-israel-reconciliation-means-for-the-region-and-the-world>.

<sup>33</sup> Asgar Asgarov, “Pro-Israel Sentiments in Azerbaijan Stand Out Amid Conflict in Gaza,” VOA News, October 10, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/pro-israel-sentiments-in-azerbaijan-stand-out-amid-conflict-in-gaza/7304802.html>.

<sup>34</sup> The Zangezur corridor is a term used for the strip of land along the Armenian-Iranian borders that separates Azerbaijan proper from its exclave of Nakhchivan to the west. The November 11, 2020, ceasefire agreement brokered by Moscow put an end to the Second Karabakh War and included a section on establishing a Russian-guarded land corridor between Azerbaijan proper and its Nakhchivan exclave, bordering Turkey. Baku plans to make use of this corridor for shipments



closely coordinated to thwart Baku's far-reaching plans. Azerbaijan has also stepped up militarist rhetoric, with some officials and even the president referring to Armenia as "Western Azerbaijan."<sup>35</sup> This, too, has raised tensions in Armenia and Iran, with the shared understanding that revanchist sentiments now popular in Azerbaijan might endanger the regional-security architecture.<sup>36</sup>

Given Azerbaijan's continuing occupation of minor pockets of eastern Armenia and Moscow's diminishing interest in supporting Yerevan, Iranians have called for a more assertive policy to prevent Baku from launching a direct military assault that would lead to any further territorial changes.<sup>37</sup> While the Islamic Republic has on multiple occasions moved detachments of Revolutionary Guards and elements of the regular ground forces toward Azerbaijan's borders, Tehran and Yerevan have recently discussed stationing Iranian troops in Armenia's Syunik Province to deter an assault.<sup>38</sup> Iran's supreme leader, a source told i24 News, issued orders to prevent Azerbaijan's takeover of the Zangezur corridor, "even if it requires the intervention of Iranian armed forces to support Armenia in case it becomes unable to resist." This source further claimed that the Revolutionary Guards "began training Armenian Iranians to operate Iranian military drones a year ago because they could quickly grasp their operational software due to their knowledge of the Persian language, in contrast to the difficulties encountered during the training of Russian personnel."<sup>39</sup>

At the same time, Armenians have increasingly found themselves abandoned by their once-central ally, Russia. Since Azerbaijan's takeover of Karabakh, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has questioned the country's reliance on Moscow. His government has approached Russian foes like the United States and France, as well as India, for political support and military purchases to counter a Turko-Azerbaijani alliance.<sup>40</sup> Armenia's increasing alienation has led it to regulate Russian media outlets, limit the country's involvement in the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization of post-Soviet states, join the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, and make ambiguous statements about the Ukraine war.<sup>41</sup> Russian elites have been repulsed by these shifts in foreign policy, which has raised concerns that Armenia, with a

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of goods, effectively establishing an important trade route connecting China and Europe. While Yerevan, fearful of the security implications, is reluctant to open the corridor, Baku insists on establishing an extraterritorial line of communication, with no Armenian passport and customs control. If successful, this would basically strip Yerevan of control over its southernmost border with Iran, cementing Armenia's status as a geographically and politically landlocked country.

<sup>35</sup> Robin Fabbro, "Aliyev says Yerevan historically Azerbaijani," OC Media, December 25, 2022, <https://oc-media.org/aliyev-says-yerevan-historically-azerbaijani>.

<sup>36</sup> Piotr Gawliczek and Khayal Iskandarov, "The Zangezur corridor as part of the global transport route (against the backdrop of power games in the South Caucasus region)," *Security and Defence Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (2023).

<sup>37</sup> Shireen Hunter, "Conflict in the Caucasus may not be over," Responsible Statecraft, October 11, 2023, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/republican-debate-israel>.

<sup>38</sup> Avi Monakov, "Iran issues threatening message to Azerbaijan, adds warning: Israel, beware," i24news, September 9, 2023, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/analysis-opinion/1694275613-iran-behind-latest-escalation-between-armenia-azerbaijan>.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ani Avestisyan, "Armenian PM sees no advantage in Russian troop presence as ties with Moscow deteriorate further," Eurasianet, October 31, 2023, <https://eurasianet.org/armenian-pm-sees-no-advantage-in-russian-troop-presence-as-ties-with-moscow-deteriorate-further>.

<sup>41</sup> The signing by Armenia of the Rome Statute establishing the International Criminal Court implies that if Putin visits the South Caucasian country, he will face immediate arrest. The court investigated Putin in March 2023 on allegations of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide committed by Russian army and civil authorities in Ukraine.

population of about three million, will be left on its own to defend against Azerbaijan and its allies.<sup>42</sup> The apparent unmaking of the once-potent Russo-Iranian-Armenian axis has brought Armenia and the Islamic Republic closer together, with Tehran becoming more assertive. Iran has repeatedly pressed India for a quarter-billion dollars' worth of weapons to ensure Armenia's defense.<sup>43</sup>

Against this background, the war in Gaza has raised the stakes for Baku, which Iran sees as pro-Israeli. If the Islamic Republic or its proxies escalate the conflict, the theocratic regime could conduct attacks against what it may see as a soft target in Azerbaijan—a country of fewer than 10 million, with no formal military alliance and a moderately advanced army. A strike by the much stronger Iran would provoke repercussions across the region, demonstrating Iran's resolve while minimizing the risk of a retaliatory strike or far-reaching economic sanctions.

The new environment has implications for Azerbaijan's relations with the states analyzed above. It is unlikely to launch a major assault against Armenia or provoke it into another round of violent conflict, as it might force Tehran to react. Although Azerbaijan has made enormous investments in having strong, modern, and self-confident military forces, it remains vulnerable to a conventional or asymmetric strike by Iran. Baku is thus likely to continue putting pressure on Yerevan to reach a peace deal that would favor its interests, while avoiding a direct military assault.

Aware of the cost-benefit ratio, Baku is also likely to distance itself from and reduce its collaboration with Israel, should the conflict with Iran escalate. The Netanyahu government may feel similarly about being dragged into the Azerbaijan-Iran standoff and discontinue its shipments of military hardware to its ally. This would be a blow to Israel's security capabilities, as the country would be stripped of its on-the-ground access to Iran and the resulting inflow of intelligence. Given these risks, Baku has taken steps to warm up its relations with the Islamic Republic, accepting Tehran's proposal for an alternative land route—the "Aras corridor"—to link "continental" Azerbaijan with its Nakhchivan exclave via Iranian territory, along the southern shores of the Aras River. The proposal would also restore full-scale diplomatic ties between the two neighbors.<sup>44</sup> While there has been no formal agreement over this Aras corridor, Baku's willingness to engage in talks signals its desire to reduce tensions. At the same time, unwilling to increase its dependence on Tehran, Baku still insists on the realization of the Zangezur corridor.

In addition, Azerbaijan's reliance on Turkey is likely to become more critical. Following Iranian military exercises along Azerbaijani borders in 2023, Ankara declared it would support Baku in case of an attack, and the two countries performed high-level military exercises near Iran.<sup>45</sup> With the Shusha Declaration, a military partnership signed in 2021, Azerbaijan expects Turkey to protect its territorial integrity in case of Iranian or Russian strikes.<sup>46</sup> However, the text of the

<sup>42</sup> Alexander Atasuntsev, "Long-Standing Ties Between Armenia and Russia Are Fraying Fast," The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 13, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/90768>.

<sup>43</sup> Monakov, "Iran issues threatening message."

<sup>44</sup> Eurasianet, "Azerbaijan And Iran Relations Warm As Tensions Ease," Oilprice.com, October 11, 2023, <https://oilprice.com/Energy/Energy-General/Azerbaijan-And-Iran-Relations-Warm-As-Tensions-Ease.html>.

<sup>45</sup> Dorian Jones, "Azerbaijan Stands Up to Iran, with Turkey's Support," VOA News, November 29, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/azerbaijan-stands-up-to-iran-with-turkey-s-support-/6855724.html>.

<sup>46</sup> Ruslan Rehimov, "Landmark Shusha Declaration between Türkiye, Azerbaijan turns year-old," Anadolu Agency, June 6, 2022, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/landmark-shusha-declaration-between-turkiye-azerbaijan-turns-year-old/2614301>.

declaration is not explicit about alliance-like guarantees of military support.<sup>47</sup> From Baku's perspective, it is therefore imperative that Turkey and Israel avoid further deterioration of relations, while it simultaneously tries to improve diplomacy with Tehran. Bringing the Erdoğan government to a negotiating table with Israel would help to ensure that Baku's closest partners would be more likely to jointly support Azerbaijan in case the situation in the post-Soviet South spirals out of control.

## CONCLUSION

Backed by Turkey and Israel, Azerbaijan's military victories in Karabakh since 2020 have reconfigured the security architecture of the South Caucasus. Meanwhile, a Russia distracted by the Ukraine war is no longer fully backing its Armenian ally, leaving Yerevan with no effective security guarantees. Moreover, Iran has found itself increasingly exposed to a challenging security environment to its northwest. The unlikely alliance of Armenia, Iran, and Russia therefore appears to have fallen apart, with Tehran focusing on bilateral relations with Yerevan and committing to more assertive policies to protect its interests.

Largely spurred on by Baku, Turkey and Israel had been growing closer, which some observers saw as another unlikely alliance, one with far-reaching implications for West Asia. However, Ankara's rapprochement with Israel appears to have been undone by the vocal support among Turkish elites for the Palestinian cause in general, and Hamas in particular, after the deadly attack on Israeli civilians and the resulting war. This position stands in stark contrast with Baku's. The Azerbaijani government has sought to avoid backing Israel and antagonizing Islamic countries like Iran. But this neutrality has drawn the ire of the Muslim world.<sup>48</sup>

If escalation in the Middle East were to draw Israel into armed conflict beyond Gaza, Turkey's support would become crucial for Azerbaijan's political survival. However, it is worth noting that Ankara still lacks a formalized military alliance treaty with Baku, which may reduce the likelihood of Turkey's direct military support and could affect Iran's perceptions and reactions. Baku is therefore likely to seek a formal, stronger alliance with Turkey while distancing itself from Israel. Nevertheless, Azerbaijan continues to receive military imports from, and maintains an ambiguous stance toward, Israel. It has voted in favor of pro-Palestinian resolutions in the United Nations but stayed away from a Tehran-led boycott of products from, and of oil exports to, Israel.<sup>49</sup>

While Azerbaijani elites and regime-dominated media have generally refrained from expressing sympathies over the Gaza war, Baku reportedly shipped a tanker containing more than a million barrels of crude to Israel's port of Eilat after Hamas attacked the country's Ashkelon port. Soon thereafter, following the Palestinian group's shelling of the Tamar gas field, the State Oil Company of Azerbaijan Republic was among three firms to be granted licenses by the Israeli government to explore offshore natural-gas deposits in the Mediterranean.<sup>50</sup> However, while a secret agreement

<sup>47</sup> Azemedia, "The full text of the Shusha Declaration," June 18, 2021, <https://aze.media/the-full-text-of-the-shusha-declaration>.

<sup>48</sup> Rovshan Mammadli, "Perspectives: Azerbaijan walks fine line as Turkey-Israel relations deteriorate," Eurasianet, November 9, 2023, <https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-azerbaijan-walks-fine-line-as-turkey-israel-relations-deteriorate>.

<sup>49</sup> Eldar Mamedov, "Why Azerbaijan won't follow Iran's calls to boycott Israel over Gaza," Eurasianet, November 6, 2023, <https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-why-azerbaijan-wont-follow-irans-calls-to-boycott-israel-over-gaza>.

<sup>50</sup> Amwaj, "How the Hamas-Israel war impacts the South Caucasus," November 24, 2023, <https://amwaj.media/article/how-the-hamas-israel-war-impacts-the-south-caucasus>.

cannot be ruled out, in the event of a direct military confrontation between Iran and Azerbaijan, it is not clear whether the Netanyahu government would be willing to provide military support to Baku.

While a shift toward Tehran is out of the question given Baku's diverging interests, a normalization of relations would substantially help minimize risks should the Gaza invasion and proxy conflicts in the Levant turn into a dangerous regional war involving Iran. Tehran could be prompted to carry out strikes against Israel's perceived assets across the region, including in Azerbaijan. This could scramble diplomatic ties, as Azerbaijan would need to maintain positive relations with both Russia and the United States, which could lead it to hold back in Armenia to escape further international backlash. However, recent clashes along the Armenian-Azerbaijani borders, in which four Armenian soldiers lost their lives, as well as Baku's continuous occupation of pockets of Armenian territory, suggest that the conflict between the two is far from over.<sup>51</sup> As long as Tehran, Yerevan, the Netanyahu government, and Baku face cross-cutting interests, there remains a risk of spillover involving key regional powers and Israel due to violence in the Levant or South Caucasus. This reshaping of the unlikely alliances examined in this article therefore poses challenges, and dire consequences, for West Asian security.

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<sup>51</sup> Al Jazeera, "Armenian soldiers killed in confrontation with Azeri forces," March 13, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/13/armenian-soldiers-killed-in-first-flare-up-since-start-of-peace-talks>.