

İSRAİL'İN AZERBAYCAN İLE STRATEJİK İŞBİRLİĞİ: İBRAHİM ANLAŞMALARINI ÇERÇEVESİNDE NEOREALİST BİR ANALİZ

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Öz

Bu makale, İsrail'in 1990'lı yıllardan bu yana Azerbaycan ile geliştirdiği stratejik ilişkileri, neorealist kuram çerçevesinde, İbrahim Anlaşmaları sonrasında şekillenen bölgesel jeopolitik bağlam üzerinden analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Neorealizm, devletlerin uluslararası sistemde güvenlik arayışında ve güç dengesi kurma çabasında bulunduğunu varsayar. Bu bağlamda İsrail'in Azerbaycan ile kurduğu yakın ilişkiler, sadece ekonomik veya diplomatik değil; aynı zamanda güvenlik temelli bir dış politika stratejisi olarak değerlendirilmektedir. Çalışma, İsrail'in bu iş birliğini Güney Kafkasya bölgesindeki güvenliği bağlamında denge unsuru olarak nasıl konumlandığını ve enerji güvenliği, askeri iş birliği gibi alanlardaki ortaklıkların, bölgesel güç mücadelesi içindeki yerini ortaya koymaktadır. 7 Ekim Gazze Savaşı sonrası İsrail'in İbrahim Anlaşmaları aracılığıyla Arap dünyasıyla ilişkilerini normalleştirme sürecinin karşı karşıya kaldığı sorunlar, İsrail'in Azerbaycan gibi Müslüman ancak Arap olmayan ülkelerle kurduğu ittifakları daha stratejik hâle getirmiştir. Çalışma, devletlerin dış politika tercihlerinin yapısal etkenlerle nasıl şekillendiğini göstermek adına neorealist yaklaşıma dayalı bir perspektif ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İsrail, Azerbaycan, İbrahim Anlaşmaları, Neorealizm, 7 Ekim Gazze Savaşı

Makaleye Ait Bilgiler

Makale Türü: Araştırma
Geliş Tarihi: 18.08.2025
Kabul Tarihi: 30.10.2025
Yayın Tarihi: 11.11.2025

Makaleye Atrf Bilgisi

BULUT Seher, (2025). "Israel's Strategic Engagement With Azerbaijan: A Neorealist Analysis Within the Abraham Accords Framework". *Muhafazakâr Düşünce*. Yıl: 21 Sayı: 69 (336-358).

muhafazakârdüşünce • yıl: 21 - sayı: 69 • Temmuz-Aralık 2025

ISRAEL'S STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENT WITH AZERBAIJAN: A NEOREALIST ANALYSIS WITHIN THE ABRAHAM ACCORDS FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to analyze Israel's strategic relations with Azerbaijan, developed since the 1990s, through the lens of Neorealism and within the regional geopolitical context shaped by the Abraham Accords. Neorealism posits that states act within an anarchic international system, primarily seeking security and striving to maintain a balance of power. In this context, Israel's close ties with Azerbaijan are not solely rooted in economic or diplomatic interests, but also constitute a security-oriented foreign policy strategy. This study reveals how Israel positions this cooperation as a balancing factor in the context of security in the South Caucasus region and examines the role of partnerships in areas such as energy security and military cooperation within the broader regional power struggle. Following the October 7 Gaza War, the challenges facing Israel's normalization process with the Arab world under the Abraham Accords have further increased the strategic significance of its alliances with Muslim but non-Arab countries like Azerbaijan. This study offers a neorealist perspective to demonstrate how structural factors shape state foreign policy behavior.

Keywords: Israel, Azerbaijan, Ibrahim Accords, Neorealism, October 7 Gaza War

Introduction

Following its establishment in 1948, Israel faced significant challenges in establishing diplomatic relations with its neighboring countries and thus consolidated its foreign policy primarily through European countries. The 1967 War marked a significant turning point in Israeli foreign policy; from this point onward, Israel began to pursue closer and more strategic relations with the United States. Following the conflicts with regional countries during the Cold War years and the subsequent invasion of Lebanon, Israel, believing that regional threats had diminished, began to focus more on internal security concerns, thereby intensifying its activities in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

After 2000, developments in geopolitically sensitive regions such as the Middle East led states like Israel to seek new directions and alliances in their foreign policy strategies. One of the notable examples of this transformation was the normalization process known as the Abraham Accords, initiated by Israel in 2020 with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain (U.S. Department of State, 2020). The primary goal of these agreements was to normalize relations between Israel and certain so-called moderate Arab countries. In return, these countries would gain access to advanced technologies and new trade opportunities, based on the shared perception of Iran as a strategic threat.

The normalization process between Israel and regional countries within the framework of the Abraham Accords evolved into a new phase after the outbreak of the Gaza War on October 7, 2023. While the consequences of this process for Israeli foreign policy continue to be evaluated, some countries have distanced themselves diplomatically, economically, and socially from Israel. In a period marked by rising global opposition to Israel, Azerbaijan's opening of an embassy in Israel has stood out as a significant development (Israel National News, 2025). Recent Israeli statements highlighting the importance of Israel-Azerbaijan relations are noteworthy in the context of expanding the scope of the Abraham Accords beyond the Middle East, particularly toward the South Caucasus. Statements by Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu indicating a goal to include Azerbaijan in this normalization process can also be interpreted as an extension of Israel's efforts to redefine its regional strategy and security architecture. In this context, Israel's effort to form alliances with not only neighboring countries but also with Muslim-majority, secular, and strategically important countries is particularly noteworthy.

This article aims to analyze the diplomatic aspects of the evolving relationship between Israel and Azerbaijan through the lens of Neorealism, as

is functional in understanding Israel's strategies of alliance expansion and regional containment. In this context, the study seeks to answer the following key questions: How has Israel's regional security reality evolved following the October 7 Gaza War? How are Israel-Azerbaijan relations being reshaped within the framework of the Abraham Accords? How are the Neorealist assumptions of security and balance of power reflected in this process? What are the potential reasons behind Azerbaijan's possible inclusion in this alliance?

The main argument of this study is that, although Israel has made efforts to expand the Abraham Accords following the Gaza War of October 7, 2023, this appears to be far more complex in the case of Azerbaijan. While the Abraham Accords have been presented by the U.S.-Israel alliance as a framework that contributes to regional security, their primary objective has been to further strengthen the security of the alliance itself. However, Azerbaijan's relations with Iran—which differ significantly from Israel's stance—as well as its close ties with Türkiye, which has become a major regional power, cast a shadow over this process.

Theoretical Framework

Neorealism is one of the major theories of international relations that explains state behavior based on the anarchic nature of the international system, with a central focus on the pursuit of security. Institutionalized by Kenneth Waltz's 1979 work *Theory of International Politics* (Waltz, 1979), this approach argues that state behavior stems more from systemic structures than from individual or domestic attributes. According to the neorealist perspective, there is no central authority in the international system, which creates an anarchic structure. Within this structure, states must rely on their own capabilities to ensure their security and maintain their sovereignty. This fundamental uncertainty inherent in the system compels states to constantly seek to increase their relative power and to balance against potential threats.

The post-Cold War international order has been characterized by shifting alliances, emerging regional power vacuums, and the rise of new security threats. Particularly in geopolitically fragile regions such as the Middle East and the South Caucasus, the neorealist logic suggests that states act not based on ideological or cultural affinities, but rather in response to the structural pressures and opportunities presented by the international system.

One of the core concepts of neorealist theory is *balancing*, which can be pursued either internally (by increasing military capabilities) or externally

(through alliances). External balancing becomes especially prominent in regions where threat perceptions are high and mutual trust is low. In such environments, alliances are not built on enduring friendships but on instrumental and interest-based relations. In this regard, the strategic partnership between Israel and Azerbaijan can be interpreted as an example of external balancing based on overlapping security interests. Despite cultural, religious, and historical differences, both states derive mutual benefits through cooperation in military, intelligence, and energy sectors. For Israel, Azerbaijan provides a strategically significant geopolitical position vis-à-vis Iran; for Azerbaijan, Israel constitutes an important defense partner in the context of its ongoing conflict with Armenia and Iran's influence in the region.

The *Abraham Accords*, signed in 2020 between Israel and several Arab states under the leadership of the United States, initiated a significant transformation in regional alliance patterns. Although Azerbaijan was not initially considered a part of this process, following the outbreak of the Gaza War on October 7, 2023, the reactions from regional states have led Israel to consider the possibility of geographically expanding the scope of the accords. From Israel's perspective, the core objectives of the accords—pragmatic cooperation, a shared understanding of security, and indirect balancing against Iran (Bermant, 2023)—are aligned with the historical background and current rationale of Israel-Azerbaijan relations.

When evaluated within the framework of the Abraham Accords, the strategic cooperation between Israel and Azerbaijan illustrates that regional partnerships are shaped not by ideological affinities but by calculations of security, power, and survival within the anarchic structure of the international system. From a neorealist analytical perspective, such relations are a structural outcome of states' rational and interest-driven behavior.

Israel's Strategic Recalibration in the Wake of the Abraham Accords

From Israel's perspective, the Cold War era is considered a period during which it fought several wars with neighboring Arab countries such as Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon—most of which resulted in Israeli military superiority and territorial gains. A de facto balance was established between Israel and Syria following the 1973 Yom Kippur War (Bulut, 2018); diplomatic relations were established with Egypt in the aftermath of the 1979 Camp David Accords. Jordan, which signed a peace agreement with Israel in 1994, also found

itself in a relatively comfortable position due to the relocation of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) from Jordan to Tunisia during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Following these developments, Israel's foreign policy focused on normalizing ties with countries like Greece, the Greek Cypriot Administration of Southern Cyprus (GCASC), Guatemala, Honduras, and Kosovo. This strategy aimed to maintain traditional alliances while reducing diplomatic isolation and enhancing international legitimacy.

A central component of Israel's efforts to ensure its security has been the *Abraham Accords*, launched with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain (U.S. Department of State, 2020). Although framed as a normalization and reconciliation process, the Abraham Accords served a dual purpose from the perspective of the United States—the primary sponsor of the initiative: bypassing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and reinforcing the regional security guarantor roles of both the U.S. and Israel. The inclusion of Morocco and Sudan into the process illustrated that the Abraham Accords had evolved into a modular normalization platform, open to expansion rather than a fixed bilateral structure. The flexible design of the agreements allowed them to be tailored to the domestic political conditions and societal sensitivities of each participant country.

The Accords aimed to go beyond the formal relations Israel had previously maintained only with Egypt (1979) and Jordan (1994), and establish an open, institutionalized partnership architecture with the Gulf monarchies. As Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated in June 2021, “The Abraham Accords enabled us to get out of the equation of land for peace to peace for peace, and we did not give up a span” (Middle East Monitor, 2021). Beyond the strategic calculus that led key Gulf countries to join the Accords, they also marked a strategic victory for Israel by reshaping the Arab-Israeli political landscape in a way that facilitated engagement with Saudi Arabia—its ultimate diplomatic target (Alghashian, 2023).

In 2022, under U.S. initiative, the Negev Forum was launched to further strengthen the Abraham Accords and expand the participation of other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 2023). One of the forum's key outcomes was to further develop the existing agreements, encourage other Arab countries to join the process, and create consensus on countering Iran's destabilizing activities in the region (Sinaice, 2022).

While this U.S.-mediated process was promoted as a step toward deep cooperation not only in diplomacy but also in trade, technology, security, tourism, and energy, it also serves specific objectives within the context of Israeli security strategy. In his first speech as head of the current coalition, Netanyahu outlined four overarching policy goals, three of which were directly related to foreign policy: first, to stop Iran—which he described as an existential threat to Israel; second, to restore security and governance within the Israeli state; and finally, to significantly expand the circle of peace, an implicit reference to normalizing relations with Saudi Arabia (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022).

Although there are no formal defense pacts, there has been an increase in intelligence sharing, joint military training (such as naval exercises with the UAE and Bahrain), and cybersecurity cooperation. Improved ties with Gulf states, particularly the UAE, bring Israel geographically closer to Iran, offering strategic advantages in surveillance and the potential establishment of forward operating bases. Cooperation with Sudan and Bahrain enhances Israel's monitoring and defense capabilities in the Red Sea and Arabian Peninsula—critical regions for both trade routes and defense against Houthi threats. The Abraham Accords have effectively created a *de facto* regional alliance against common threats, particularly Iran and its proxies like Hezbollah.

However, Iran- identified as the “common threat”—represents varying interests and risks for each country, and this perception alone does not fully explain the motivations of the Arab signatories (Dana, 2023). In this respect, the driving force behind the Accords appears to be the U.S.-led effort to construct a regional order capable of filling power vacuums and countering hostile actors. This has involved providing critical assistance to signatory countries and strengthening mutual arms agreements to form a comprehensive military and security alliance (Goldberg, 2020). In return, Arab countries have both declared their alignment with the U.S. role in the region and sought access to Israeli military technology and expertise to counter the threats they perceive. This dynamic could further militarize the region and potentially escalate existing conflicts. The Accords, in this sense, aim to expand Israel's sphere of influence and enable the country to project its military superiority. The failure of U.S. President Donald Trump to secure a second term in the November 2020 elections (Khanin, 2025a) raised serious questions about the future of the Abraham Accords. Moreover, the outbreak of the Gaza War on October 7, 2023, further amplified concerns over whether the process could withstand deeper crises.

October 7: Accords on the Edge?

The outbreak of hostilities in the Gaza Strip on October 7, 2023, marked a turning point in the trajectory of the Abraham Accords. Due to widespread sympathy in the Arab public for the Palestinian cause (Robbins, 2021), the political cost of normalization increased significantly following the war. Although Arab-Israeli contacts rooted in the Abraham Accords were not entirely severed, a relative cooling occurred in intergovernmental and business relations. During the Gaza war, the United Arab Emirates publicly condemned Israel but maintained diplomatic ties. While Emirati institutions continued cooperation with Israeli counterparts, key projects—such as the joint development of Israel’s largest offshore gas field by Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC), (British Petroleum) BP, and NewMed Energy—were suspended. Travel from Israel to Dubai also declined significantly. Bahrain recalled its ambassador, and Israeli tourism to Morocco decreased, although broader relations remained stable. The normalization process stalled, with countries like Oman postponing decisions until after the U.S. elections (Ismaik, 2022). Saudi Arabia’s pre-war rapprochement with Israel was disrupted, and Riyadh renewed its demand for a firm Israeli commitment to a Palestinian state as a condition for normalization.

It would be inaccurate to interpret these developments as a full return to the pre-Accords status quo. However, the events following October 7 revealed the extent to which Israel’s efforts to normalize relations with regional actors were being tested. While the reaction from Arab states with formal ties to Israel did not escalate to the level of severing diplomatic agreements, it now seems unlikely that more Arab governments—particularly from the Middle East and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)—will join the Abraham Accords in the near future. The growing unpopularity of Israel among Arab publics is a reality already well understood by Arab leaders (Cafiero, 2024). Aware of this perception, Israeli leadership has sought to geographically expand the Accords beyond the Middle East in order to avoid a stagnation similar to what occurred following its 1994 peace agreement with Jordan.

Amid the Gaza War, the return of Donald Trump to the White House on January 20, 2025, revived efforts to restart the Abraham Accords process. The Trump administration’s supportive statements regarding Israel’s security—seeing Israel as its primary Middle East ally—were closely followed in Tel Aviv. Interpreting this support as a signal, Israel began urging Washington to redirect its attention toward actors that could positively contribute to Isra-

el's envisioned role in Trump's proposed "New Middle East." It is evident that Israel has not abandoned its plans to expand the Abraham Accords as a strategic U.S.-Israel-Arab regional initiative. On May 5, 2025, during Israel's 77th Independence Day celebrations, U.S. Special Envoy to the Middle East, Steve Witkoff, emphasized that policymakers in both Washington and Arab capitals remained motivated to continue and expand the process, as failure to do so would "reward Hamas" (Khanin, 2025a).

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had already outlined these expansion plans during a July 2024 speech to the U.S. Congress, in which he argued that normalization could be extended based on the shared threat posed by Iran. He proposed that all countries opposing Iran should unite under a security pact he termed the "Abraham Alliance," the natural extension of the original normalization agreements mediated during the Trump era. Netanyahu emphasized that "all countries that are at peace with Israel, and all those that will make peace with Israel, should be invited to join this alliance" (Hernandez, 2024).

Although there have been no clear indications that countries participating in the Negev Forum are reconsidering their commitment to the Accords following the Gaza War, the apparent difficulty in bringing new regional actors into the process in the short term has prompted Israel to shift its strategy toward incorporating other Muslim-majority states. Former Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen's visit on April 19 to Azerbaijan—a majority-Muslim country bordering Iran—illustrates this shift. Following the visit, Cohen stated: "In the past, as the Foreign Ministry, we highlighted the Gulf countries and Africa as areas for expanding the Abraham Accords. With this visit... we are expanding toward the Eurasia region" (Schneider, 2023). Cohen's remarks underscored Israel's renewed commitment to broadening the *peace-for-peace* paradigm beyond its original geographic scope (Alghashian, 2023).

During this process, the U.S.-Israel alliance made efforts to include Azerbaijan in the Abraham Accords. In mid-March 2025, U.S. Special Envoy Steve Witkoff visited Baku alongside his Israeli and Azerbaijani counterparts. The meetings reportedly focused on enhancing trilateral cooperation and aligning strategic priorities in light of increasing instability in the region. Azerbaijan's potential accession to the Abraham Accords could geographically expand the normalization framework and serve as a counterbalance to Iran's regional influence (The Jerusalem Post, 2025a). In March 2025, a motion was introduced in the Knesset calling for the strengthening of the "strategic alliance

with Azerbaijan” and advocating for Baku’s inclusion in the normalization process (The Jerusalem Post, 2025b). The following day, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s office confirmed that discussions with the United States were ongoing to “establish a robust framework for trilateral cooperation between Israel, Azerbaijan, and the U.S.” It is reasonable to assume that Baku may anticipate tangible benefits from early participation in the framework—similar to those enjoyed by Muslim-majority states that joined the Abraham Accords in 2020 like lifting of U.S. sanctions imposed under Section 907.

Despite the close ties between Azerbaijan and Israel, this alignment has received inconsistent support from Israel’s key ally, the United States. In 1992, the U.S. Congress passed a legislative measure in response to Azerbaijan’s blockade of Armenia during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. According to Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act, U.S. assistance to Azerbaijan was prohibited unless “the Government of Azerbaijan took demonstrable steps to cease all blockades and other offensive uses of force against Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh” (US Congress, 1992). Beginning in 2002, this provision was waived annually under national security grounds, primarily due to Azerbaijan’s cooperation in counterterrorism efforts and energy diversification. This waiver facilitated enhanced bilateral cooperation, including Baku’s decision to allow U.S. forces to use Azerbaijani territory for operations in Afghanistan. However, following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and under the Biden administration, Section 907 was reinstated in 2024, leading to a downturn in U.S.-Azerbaijan relations (Huseynov, 2025).

On March 13, 2025, during his address at the 12th Global Baku Forum, President Ilham Aliyev expressed frustration over the inconsistent U.S. policy: “So, when you need us, you lift the sanctions. And when you don’t, you reimpose them. How are we supposed to build long-term relations with you this way?” (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev, 2025). Despite the close relationship, Azerbaijan remains subject to sanctions under Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act, which restricts direct U.S. government assistance (Caucasus Watch, 2025). Nevertheless, President Aliyev also voiced optimism that relations between Baku and Washington would improve under a new U.S. administration: “We hope to rebuild our strong partnership under the new administration.” (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev, 2025). Israeli policymakers like Knesset members such as Simon Moshiaşvili argued that continuing these sanctions was contradictory, given Azerbaijan’s deepening ties with both Israel and the West. They called for the

permanent repeal of Section 907 and advocated for Azerbaijan's formal inclusion in the Abraham Accords as part of a broader strategy to institutionalize U.S.-Israel-Azerbaijan trilateral cooperation.

In August 2025, following the peace agreement signed between Azerbaijan and Armenia at the White House, U.S. President Donald Trump announced the lifting of restrictions on defense cooperation between the United States and Azerbaijan. This development demonstrates Washington's recognition that Azerbaijan has consistently sought pragmatic relations with the United States (AzeMedia,2025). Moreover, this development constitutes a noteworthy achievement for Israel, which had persistently advocated such a policy shift and, although it remains unclear whether Israel's pressures towards U.S. were ultimately successful, thereby realized a strategic objective it had pursued over an extended period.

The 'Periphery' Country of Israeli "Peace Paradigm": Strategic Alliance With Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan stands out as the leading country in this third category of potential members in the expanded Abraham Accords, having developed the most comprehensive and multifaceted relationship with Israel since the initiation of diplomatic ties. Since the outbreak of the ongoing war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, and despite the widespread anti-Israel sentiment across the Muslim world, Azerbaijan has taken a markedly different stance (Kaleji,2024). Contrary to calls from Türkiye—its close ally—to halt energy exports to Israel, Azerbaijan has instead significantly increased its oil shipments to Israel and, notably, opened an embassy in Tel Aviv during the height of the conflict. These actions were perceived by Israel as particularly significant. Not only were there no public protests in Azerbaijan in reaction to the developments in the Middle East, but there were also explicit expressions of solidarity with Israel. This further underscores the unique character of Israel-Azerbaijan relations within the broader regional context.

Bilateral relations between Azerbaijan and Israel were initiated shortly after Azerbaijan gained independence in 1991 and were elevated to the diplomatic level in 1992. The foundation of this relationship rests on mutual strategic needs. From Israel's perspective, Azerbaijan is a vital element in its regional security strategy, particularly due to its geographical proximity and shared border with Iran. For Azerbaijan, Israel represents a valuable partner, especially in military technology and security cooperation. In 1993, Israel de-

cided to open an embassy in Baku, while Azerbaijan refrained from opening an embassy in Tel Aviv, opting instead to maintain unofficial communication through the Israeli offices of Azerbaijan Airlines (Murinson, 2014, p. 14). Since the establishment of diplomatic ties, most high-level official visits have been initiated by Israel (Murinson, 2010, p. 127). This rapprochement reached a level in the late 1980s where the Israeli government decided to provide Azerbaijan's forces with Stinger surface-to-air missile launchers during the First Nagorno-Karabakh War (1988–1994). Israeli analysts have described Azerbaijan as a “covert pillar” of Israel's regional security architecture (Azernews, 2011), and as a country of key importance for U.S. strategic interests in the region (Khanin, 2025b). Despite certain reservations, Azerbaijan remains the only country in the region that has maintained a multidimensional partnership with Israel for many years. For Israel, the value of a multi-level partnership with Azerbaijan is primarily driven by concerns related to Iran and the pursuit of energy security, which underpins their economic relations.

Iranian Issue

In 2009, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev used an iceberg metaphor to describe bilateral relations, stating that “nine-tenths of the relationship lies below the surface” (Perry, 2012). It would not be incorrect to suggest that Iran has played a role in the fact that relations with Israel have not proceeded through official channels and that Azerbaijan long refrained from formalizing its diplomatic ties with Israel. Azerbaijan shares a more than 700 kilometer border with Iran and Iran's largest ethnic minority, the ethnic Azerbaijanis, constitute approximately 18 million of Iran's population. The regional ambitions of Iran, Azerbaijan's Shia Muslim neighbor on the Caspian Sea coast, appear as a point of convergence between Azerbaijan and Israel. From Israel's perspective, the Iranian regime has increasingly been viewed as an existential threat, particularly due to its openly anti-Zionist rhetoric since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, its nuclear activities, and its support for anti-Israel groups such as Hezbollah. This shared perspective has significantly nourished the security relations between Azerbaijan and Israel and has also echoed in Iran, which perceives the growing security cooperation between the two countries as a challenge to its regional influence (Kamali, 2025).

Despite these similarities, the two countries' perceptions of Iran contain serious nuances. While Israel openly declares the Iranian regime as an enemy (Freedland, 2025), President Aliyev of Azerbaijan emphasizes the continuation of official relations between the two countries. However, this does not mean

that Azerbaijan fails to recognize the elements supported by Iran as threats to its national security.

One of the most striking dimensions of the security relations between the two countries is the allegation of Israeli military intelligence activities on Azerbaijani soil. Azerbaijan plays a pivotal role in Israel's broader strategy of moving closer to Iran, aimed at encircling Tehran by deepening ties with its neighboring states (Shahbazov, 2011). Reports that Israel has established various intelligence listening and observation stations, particularly in areas close to the Iranian border, indicate that the relationship between the two countries carries a serious geopolitical dimension. This situation underscores the importance Israel places on Azerbaijan as part of its containment strategy toward Iran. From the Israeli perspective, Azerbaijan serves as a potential platform for conducting operations against Iran and acts as an advanced outpost in the Caucasus that could be utilized in the event of a possible conflict with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Although this assumption may seem exaggerated, analyses suggesting that in the 1990s, with the permission of the Baku administration, Israel established intelligence-gathering stations along the Iran-Azerbaijan border lend some concrete basis to this viewpoint (The Times, 2012). Against this backdrop, the geopolitical importance of relations with Azerbaijan continues to be emphasized by Israel. Iranian authorities have repeatedly accused their northern neighbor of serving as a forward base for Israeli reconnaissance and sabotage operations targeting Tehran (Reuters, 2021). The fact that this potential trajectory is viewed as entirely realistic in Tehran and has led to clear concerns is thought-provoking.

Economic Relations: Exports of Israel's Military-Industrial Production and Energy

For Israel and the United States, however, Azerbaijan's strategic importance extends beyond countering Iran. Baku and Tel Aviv have established an economic partnership shaped around two strategic areas: military-technical cooperation and energy. Azerbaijan, a key player in Europe's energy security, supplies oil and gas to EU member states, offering a substantial alternative to Russian energy exports (Stevens, 2024). Positioned at the heart of the Middle Corridor—a vital trade route connecting Europe to Central Asia through the South Caucasus—Azerbaijan plays a critical role in global supply chains. Since the 1990s, Azerbaijan has also played a key role in Israel's energy security. Indeed, Israel imports more than 40% of its oil needs from Azerbaijan via the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline (Geybullayeva, 2024).

Azerbaijani gas, which contributes significantly to the Israeli economy, continued to flow to Israel even during the period of the Second Intifada (2000–2004). Following the events of October 7 in Gaza (a period during which the Israeli armed forces particularly needed uninterrupted fuel supplies), Azerbaijan increased its oil exports. Israel and Azerbaijan have also reached an unprecedented deal in their economic cooperation. At the end of January 2025, the Azerbaijani state oil and gas company SOCAR acquired a 10% stake in the international consortium responsible for developing the Israeli Tamar gas field, which was discovered in 2009 on the Mediterranean shelf (News AZ, 2025). As part of the same deal package, SOCAR, in partnership with BP, won a new natural gas exploration tender in Israeli waters in March 2025 (Sternlicht, 2025). From the very beginning, it was evident that this cooperation extended far beyond purely economic concerns (Khanin, 2025b). This is also the first deal for SOCAR to participate in the exploration and development of hydrocarbon deposits located outside the territory of Azerbaijan.

The partnership Azerbaijan has built with Israel provides Baku with access to modern weapons systems equipped with advanced technology. Since 1991, Azerbaijan has purchased approximately 7 billion USD worth of military equipment from Israel. Since the late 2000s, Azerbaijan has been one of the largest importers of Israeli military products. In the 2010s, 60–69% of its military imports consisted of Israeli-made materials (Khanin, 2025b) and it becomes more meaningful when evaluated in context: In 2020, the trade volume between Israel and Azerbaijan (excluding oil, but including diamond imports) reached approximately 200 million USD. In the same year, Israel's total arms exports amounted to 8.3 billion USD, marking the second highest year after 2017 (9.2 billion USD).

Considering the qualitative metrics of Israel-Azerbaijan military-technical cooperation, Azerbaijan's procurement of weapons from Israel is driven by several significant factors: balancing and diversifying arms agreements signed with Russia; gaining technological superiority over Armenian-backed forces positioned in Nagorno-Karabakh; and defending offshore hydrocarbon reserves in the Caspian Sea against potential threats. The latter concern resembles Israel's sense of pressure from Iran in the Eastern Mediterranean. However, the Aktau Convention signed on August 12, 2018, among the countries bordering the Caspian Sea, significantly eliminated the risks that Iran's maritime claims could pose for Baku (President of Russia, 2018).

Israel is currently considered one of the main suppliers of the Azerbaijani navy. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, between 2016 and 2020, Israel supplied more than 60 percent of Azerbaijan's major arms imports (Berman, 2023). In addition to the six OPV-62 offshore patrol vessels and Shaldag fast patrol boats, another key area of military-technical cooperation between the two countries is anti-tank warfare and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). UAVs constitute the most striking element of Israel-Azerbaijan military cooperation. Since ordering its first Aerostar reconnaissance UAV from Israel's Aeronautics Defence Systems company in 2007, Azerbaijan has largely equipped its armed forces with Israeli-made drones. Just before the Nagorno-Karabakh war, Azerbaijan was reported to possess around 120 tactical and 500 kamikaze drones, the vast majority of which were of Israeli origin. In this context, examples of nearly the entire spectrum of Israeli UAVs are present in the Azerbaijani army. Lastly, during the active phase of the conflict, a "air bridge" established between Israel and Azerbaijan enabled the shipment of ammunition and equipment via nearly 100 cargo aircraft through Turkish and Georgian airspace (Delanoë, 2021).

Although Israeli officials do not openly state the claims that Israel has exported hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of weapons and defense technologies to Azerbaijan, developments during the 2020 Second Karabakh War have reignited these discussions. In the war, Azerbaijan, with Iran's tacit support, regained much of the territory it had lost for 30 years and expanded its border with Iran by 100 kilometers. Israel stepped up its weapons shipments to Azerbaijan during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Azerbaijan emerged victorious in that six-week war with Armenia, which claimed the lives of more than 6,000 soldiers and resulted in Baku regaining control over disputed territories (Idan & Shaffer, 2021). The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defense declined to comment on the use of Israeli weapons in Nagorno-Karabakh or on Armenia's concerns regarding Azerbaijan's military partnership with Israel. In July, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant visited Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, and praised the two countries' military cooperation and "counterterrorism" partnership (Perry, 2025).

The Türkiye-Azerbaijan-Israel Triangle

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's planned visit to Baku on May 7, 2025, for a meeting with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev was canceled due to "developments on the Gaza and Syrian fronts as well as intense political and security commitments." Similarly, Israeli President Isaac

Herzog's scheduled participation in the United Nations COP29 climate conference in Azerbaijan was canceled, citing security concerns (Times of Israel, 2024). However, assessments suggested that the real reason behind these cancellations was Türkiye's refusal to allow an Israeli "Wing of Zion" jet to pass through its airspace (Eichner, 2024). This incident points to Türkiye's key role—technically speaking—in the development of Azerbaijan-Israel relations. Yet, there are strong indications that the relations among these three countries are more interconnected than they appear.

Israel has been paying close attention to the fact that Azerbaijan's close ally Türkiye has significantly advanced its foreign policy goals in nearby regions. Particularly, the toppling of the Assad regime in November 2024 and the rise to power of a Turkish-backed government has substantially increased Türkiye's presence in Syria, which poses a contradiction to Israel's regional objectives. Since the beginning of the crisis, Israel has focused on two primary concerns near the Syrian border: preventing the deployment of potentially threatening forces near its borders and opposing the presence of strategic weapons on Syrian territory that could be used against Israel. In contrast, Türkiye has not limited itself to prioritizing only its own security but has also strongly supported the democratic demands emerging from grassroots movements in regional countries. Rather than adopting a status quo-oriented stance, Türkiye has taken on significant responsibilities in political, economic, and diplomatic realms. The failure to take concrete actions for regional stability since the Syrian crisis—and, instead, further destabilization—has led to evaluations that the already problematic Turkish-Israeli relations may face even more serious challenges in the future. Israel, fearing that Türkiye's presence in Syria would restrict its regional freedom of action, has frequently carried out attacks on Syrian territory—actions that have been repeatedly criticized by Türkiye. Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan has emphasized that Israeli attacks undermine the Shara government's efforts to combat threatening elements within the country (Berman & Freiberg, 2025).

These developments are being closely monitored by Azerbaijan, which maintains close relations with both Türkiye and Israel. Azerbaijan has long desired the re-establishment of ties between Türkiye and Israel, which were restored briefly with Israeli President Herzog's visit in 2022 but were severed again following the Gaza War that began on October 7, 2023. It appears that Azerbaijan does not intend to remain a passive observer in the face of these developments. After both Türkiye and Israel played a critical role in

Azerbaijan's success in the 2020 Second Karabakh War (Gafarlı & Arnold, 2021), Baku intensified its efforts to rebuild constructive relations between the two countries. Azerbaijan, through its strong relationships with both of these regional actors, is attempting to assume an intermediary and balancing role. Its efforts to ease tensions between Türkiye and Israel primarily serve the purpose of safeguarding and maximizing its own security and foreign policy autonomy. Having owed its success in the 2020 Second Karabakh War to both Türkiye and Israel, Azerbaijan is well aware that a direct conflict between these two states would harm its national interests. As part of these efforts, Azerbaijani President İlham Aliyev offered to host a summit between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and then-Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in April 2021. In his keynote address on Azerbaijan's geopolitical strategy at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy on April 9, 2025, President Aliyev expressed hope that “despite legitimate concerns and a high level of mistrust, common ground for normalization and mutual areas of interest can still be found” (JAM News, 2025). This statement likely reflects the unique geopolitical reality that both Türkiye and Israel are, *de facto*, neighboring countries to Syria. Aliyev's remarks suggest that, although the post-October 7 tensions have damaged Turkish-Israeli relations, he does not view the situation as irreversible.

Indeed, at Aliyev's initiative, negotiations began in Baku between an Israeli delegation led by National Security Council Chairman Tzachi Hanegbi and a senior Turkish delegation. While Israel framed the meeting as “an effort to establish common ground for regional stability,” Türkiye emphasized the Syrian dimension, characterizing it as “the first technical meeting between Türkiye and Israel aimed at establishing a deconfliction mechanism to prevent unwanted incidents in Syria.” This is significant at least in the sense that both sides had an opportunity to assess each other's expectations. Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan's statement—“As Türkiye, we have no intention of entering into conflict with Israel or any other country in Syria”—points to a regional approach aligned with Azerbaijan's efforts and underscores that Türkiye does not seek to generate conflict in the region (Altun, Dinçer & Tarhan, 2025). Despite mutual distrust, the public statements suggest that the contacts have had a tangible impact. In mid-May, it was reported that Israel and Türkiye had established a permanent direct communication line to prevent potential military tensions or misunderstandings in Syria (i24 News, 2025). A few days later, it emerged that Israeli and Syrian officials held undisclosed, direct talks in Azerbaijan, with Turkish observers present (Izso & Lister,

2025). According to a report by Reuters citing Middle East sources, Israel and Syria are now engaged in direct talks in an Israeli-controlled area along their mutual border (Azhari & Al-Khalidi, 2025). Syrian President Shara's statement—"We have common enemies and can play an important role in regional security"—suggests a convergence between Syria, Israel, and Türkiye on regional threat perception, thereby increasing the likelihood of success in Azerbaijan's mediation efforts. Calling for a return to the 1974 Disengagement Agreement between Syria and Israel, President Shara portrayed the agreement not only as a ceasefire line but also as a potential foundation for mutual respect. He further emphasized the protection of civilians, particularly the Druze communities in southern Syria and the Golan Heights, who he claimed were being incited against the Shara government by Israel—bringing Syria's stance closer to that of Türkiye.

Given that Türkiye and Israel are still far from establishing a sustainable cooperation or strategic partnership, this does not mean that Israel, from Azerbaijan's security and interest-optimization perspective, is equally distant. Israel's moves to deepen ties with Azerbaijan can be interpreted as an effort to recalibrate its relationship with Türkiye. According to neorealist theory, the anarchic nature of the international system compels states to rely on their own capabilities to ensure their security. In this context, Israel's efforts to deepen its relationship with Azerbaijan can be interpreted both as an attempt to compensate for its regional isolation due to tensions with Türkiye and as part of a balancing strategy against emerging security threats in nearby regions—particularly in Syria.

As tensions in Turkish-Israeli relations have intensified in recent times, Azerbaijan has gained more influence in Israeli foreign policy. This reflects Israel's desire to strengthen its relationship with Baku and reinforce its bilateral ties—already of an allied nature—within a special framework inspired by the Abraham Accords. However, if Azerbaijan begins to perceive that its growing ties with Israel are harming its relationship with Türkiye, it may withdraw from the process. Therefore, it can be expected that Israel will act cautiously in its efforts to rebalance relations with Türkiye.

Conclusion

Israel-Azerbaijan relations have been constructed not merely on the basis of bilateral interests, but as part of a broader regional and international strategic framework. Historically rooted in pragmatism, these relations are strategi-

cally focused on mutual security and interest optimization. From a neorealist perspective, this partnership indicates both states' pursuit of reliable alliances that would enhance their relative power and security in order to mitigate the constraints imposed by the international system. Israel's efforts to expand the framework of the Abraham Accords, particularly by incorporating Azerbaijan, can be interpreted as a strategy to strengthen its regional position and mitigate its security vulnerabilities, especially amid the foreign policy uncertainties following the Gaza War that began on October 7. Seeking to include Azerbaijan in this process, Israel aims to institutionalize its historically grounded ties with Baku and to incorporate them into a wider regional architecture.

However, it is evident that this process contains certain internal challenges. Despite Azerbaijan's long-standing multidimensional relations with Israel, its alliance-level partnership with Türkiye and the absence of a hostile stance toward Iran—as opposed to Israel's posture—complicates U.S. assessments of Azerbaijan's regional role. In order to maximize their strategic autonomy while avoiding complete alignment with one camp, secondary powers such as Azerbaijan maneuver within the confines of great power rivalries, as demonstrated by these dynamics. While Israel has lobbied the United States on this matter, the U.S.-Israel security alliance has yet to produce a clear picture regarding Azerbaijan's strategic position in the region. It appears that Azerbaijan's hedging strategy vis-à-vis Türkiye and Iran significantly contributes to this ambiguity. From a neorealist perspective, this illustrates a middle power's logical approach to foreign policy, which aims to increase its leverage through strategic ambiguity while avoiding entanglement in great power conflicts.

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