

# Between Israel and Palestine: the evolution of expressions of Azerbaijani-Palestinian solidarity

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On 6 December 1996, at a press conference in Baku that then Azerbaijani president Heydər Əliyev organized for local and international media, the president received a question from the press on whether alleged concessions made by Azerbaijan to maintain the 1994 Bishkek ceasefire “create a basis to make this conflict closer to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.” In response, Əliyev denied that Azerbaijan had made concessions or that the Karabakh conflict would come to resemble the political stalemate of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>[\[i\]](#)</sup>

The conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh and Israel-Palestine may be geographically removed from one another and generally conceptualized as afflicting distinctive and mutually exclusive regions (the South Caucasus versus the Levant, the former Soviet Union versus the Middle East). However, this perception masks the complex interactions between the conflicts brought on by a number of factors. Heydər Əliyev, who formed strong ties with the Palestinian Liberation Organization during his KGB service, helped forge robust relations with Israel in the 1990s, facilitated through people-to-people ties between Azerbaijani Jews (in both Azerbaijan and Israel-Palestine) and Israeli Jews. These trans-regional connections also run through Iran and Turkey, which together straddle the bounds between the Middle East and the Caucasus. Iran, which has had a hostile relationship with Israel since the Islamic revolution of 1979, borders both Armenia and Azerbaijan.<sup>[\[ii\]](#)</sup> A large Armenian diaspora in the

Arab world, the result of Ottoman deportations from Anatolia in the Armenian genocide, has been politically engaged in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>[iii]</sup> Azerbaijan's closest partner, Turkey, is historically, as a successor to the Ottoman Empire, and presently, under the Islamist government of its president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, invested in the politics of Israel-Palestine.<sup>[iv]</sup> Moreover, given the worldwide resonances of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, its features and politics are widely-known amongst Armenians, Azerbaijanis, and many others in the world.

This paper examines the ways in which references to Azerbaijani pan-Islamic solidarity with Palestinians communicate positions on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In particular, I focus on the suppressed narratives of Azerbaijani-Palestinian solidarity, which have largely fallen outside the official discourse of Azerbaijan and Israel as a result of the close partnership between the two countries. The Azerbaijani state has highlighted Azerbaijani-Palestinian solidarity in engagements with other Muslim-majority states, while highlighting cooperation with Israel in appeals for Israeli security assistance and American Jewish political influence. This double game of Palestinian solidarity for Islamic partners and Israeli partnership to the trans-Atlantic has been effective for Azerbaijan as it has sought to win support internationally around its position in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

I begin with a brief summary of Azerbaijani-Israeli and Azerbaijani-Palestinian relations since the restoration of Azerbaijani independence in 1991. I follow this by examining existing sources on Azerbaijani public opinion regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I then consider the discourse of Iranian-Palestinian resistance, or *müqavimət*, in the Azerbaijani-Iranian relationship of the 1990s, and the intersection of Karabakh and Palestine in Azerbaijani appeals to pan-Islamic solidarity. Recognizing the present reluctance

of the Azerbaijani state to emphatically embrace the Palestinian cause in light of its close alignment with Israel, I demonstrate how the Palestinian embassy in Baku communicates solidarity to Azerbaijanis and how Azerbaijani Islamists form their politics with reference to both Karabakh and Palestine.

With regards to Armenia and Azerbaijan, the framing of the Armenian genocide in terms of the Holocaust gave new dimensions of symbolic power to references to Israel, Palestine, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the context of Nagorno-Karabakh.<sup>[v]</sup> The Armenian genocide and the Holocaust formed the basis of Ralph Lemkin's definition of genocide that many states adopted through the U.N. Convention on Genocide.<sup>[vi]</sup> Armenian-American organizations, including the Armenian National Committee of America, have sought to frame the legacy of genocide in a bid of moral suasion to put an end to the close relationship between the Israeli defense industry and the Azerbaijani military.<sup>[vii]</sup> Both Armenians and Jews in modern history formed communities across imperial spaces and assumed, to use the term of Yuri Slezkine, the role of *service nomads*, outsiders who completed tasks that their neighbors were "unable or unwilling to perform."<sup>[viii]</sup> Their shared social category makes the post-genocide connection between Armenians and Jews more politically compelling. Some Azerbaijanis and advocates for Azerbaijan have countered by referring to *Xocalı genocide* with regard to the massacre of Azerbaijani civilians by Armenian forces in February 1992.<sup>[ix]</sup> A quote of Heydər Əliyev on the website of the Supreme Court of Azerbaijan proclaims that "the unthinkable Xocalı genocide was perpetrated against the people of Azerbaijan as a whole. [...] It's genocide, the same as a historical crime against all humanity."<sup>[x]</sup>

A similar global politicization of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on its own terms, from Northern Ireland to Western Sahara, enhanced the potency of its resonances in an engrossed

and complex ethno-national struggle.<sup>[xi]</sup> While president Heydər Əliyev was comfortable making allusions to the Palestinian struggle in bids to solicit pan-Islamic solidarity with Azerbaijan, this tendency weakened over time. Following the signing of the *Contract of the Century* and the flood of oil wealth, the emphasis on pan-Islamic solidarity in the face of the dispossession of Muslims, with its Khomeinist and pro-Palestinian valence, declined rapidly. In the worldviews Laurence Broers distinguished as Heydər Əliyev's Azerbaijanism (*Azərbaycançılıq*) and İlham Əliyev's Wide Azerbaijanism, and in the broader institutional logic of the regime in Azerbaijan, there was no conceptual place for the permanent revolutionary, *müqavimət* politics of the Ba'ath, Iran, and Palestine.<sup>[xii]</sup> In the period of the transition of power from Heydər Əliyev to his son İlham Əliyev in the years 1999 to 2005, "the exclusive goal of retaining the reins of power in the hands of the Əliyev family drove foreign policy."<sup>[xiii]</sup> Partnership with Israel fit this bill – providing substantive military and economic assistance with no demands for reform or democratization.

Many Euro-Atlantic liberals in the 1990s hoped that Azerbaijani integration into the trans-Atlantic economic space through hydrocarbon exports and membership in institutions such as the Council of Europe would facilitate the country's democratization and the liberalization of its economy.<sup>[xiv]</sup> This hope died a slow death when İlham Əliyev and his regime broke the political power of the Azerbaijani opposition and civil society, constructing one of the world's most repressive states.<sup>[xv]</sup> It seems clear, however, that this integration pushed Azerbaijan further away from a potential alignment with Iran and its allies across the Middle East. This integration incentivized Azerbaijan to articulate its position in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict not through the discourse of *müqavimət*, but through the language of the U.N.-recognized principle of territorial integrity, or *ərazi bütövlüyü*. While

Azerbaijan has trumpeted its position as a leading member of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), its conflict with Armenia coupled with its precarious geographic position between revisionist Iran, Russia, and Turkey have led its government to wholeheartedly embrace the forms of international legalism.<sup>[xvi]</sup>

As might be expected, in the years of defeat and its aftermath in the 1990s, Azerbaijan sought to use all the rhetorical tools at its disposal to craft national unity and international solidarity. In this regard, the position of Azerbaijani leadership in the 1990s resembled that of Mustafa Kemal during the Turkish War of Independence. During this period, Mustafa Kemal employed “pan-Islamic rhetoric [...] calculated to reinforce this understanding [of pan-Islamic solidarity] and preserve the valuable support of the Khilāfat movement” and avoid alienating Kurds, while also augmenting “his nationalist opposition to imperialism with a purely rhetorical socialism,” in order to preempt more left-wing, Bolshevik-aligned rivals to the leadership of the Nationalist Movement.<sup>[xvii]</sup> In desperate circumstances like those which faced Turks in the terms of the Treaty of Sevrès, Azerbaijanis showed a similar ideological flexibility and willingness to engage in the simultaneous processes of seeking pan-Islamic solidarity and economic (as well as limited political) integration with the Euro-Atlantic space. Partnership with the Israeli state coupled with fluctuating relations with Iran has necessarily suppressed, though never entirely erased, the imagination of pan-Islamic support for Azerbaijan and Azerbaijani-Palestinian solidarity.

### **The Azerbaijani-Israeli relationship**

Azerbaijan’s close relationship with Israel rests on a transactional basis of arms sales and mutual suspicion of Iran. Diplomatic relations between Azerbaijan and Israel began on 7 April 1992, at the close of president Ayaz Mütəllibov’s

rule, when Armenian forces turned the tide around Stepanakert/Xankəndi and pressed towards Shushi/Şuşa. The substance of the relationship has always been security cooperation. As for economic cooperation, there has been little. Although Israeli energy giant Bateman Litwin attempted to modernize electrical infrastructure in Nakhichevan in the 1990s, it withdrew in the early 2000s after facing “exorbitant license fees [from] Azerbaijani state ‘regulators’ and an inability to gain state guarantees.”<sup>[xviii]</sup>

The Azerbaijani government had been sensitive regarding its ties to Israel as far back as the early days of Heydər Əliyev’s post-independence government. Indeed, “the absence of an Azerbaijani embassy in Israel and the lack of reciprocity in exchanges at the ministerial level on the Azerbaijani part served as a constant irritant in bilateral relations” between Azerbaijan and Israel, though the Azerbaijani government recently resolved this by opening its embassy in Tel Aviv.<sup>[xix]</sup> The first visit of an Azerbaijani foreign minister to Israel, scheduled in spring 1999, was nipped in the bud. When then Foreign Minister Tofiq Zülfüqarov “was leaving his office to board the plane to Israel, Vəfa Quluzadə, then chief foreign policy advisor, received a personal phone call from Heydər Əliyev to immediately inform the foreign minister that the trip was canceled.”<sup>[xx]</sup>

In the 1990s, as think-tanks such as the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP) and the Jewish Institute for National Security of America (JINSA) trumpeted a new Israel-Turkey axis in the Middle East, both organizations aligned with American Jewish groups, including the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), B’nai B’rith, and the American Jewish Committee to advocate for lifting Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act, which prohibited most forms of U.S. assistance to the government of Azerbaijan.<sup>[xxi]</sup> These efforts earned American Jews the thanks of president Heydər

Əliyev in a speech commemorating the anniversary of Azerbaijani-Israeli diplomatic relations at the Israeli embassy in Baku and embitterment from Armenian and Greek American organizations and their political allies.<sup>[xxii]</sup>

The tangible benefits of Azerbaijani-Israeli partnership have led the Azerbaijani political opposition to the Əliyev regime to claim credit for it, accepting the same rationale for strong ties as state officials do. Müsavat Partiyası, an opposition formation associated with İsa Qəmbər and Arif Hacıllı and formed as the declared successor to the party of the same name led by Məhəmməd Əmin Rəsulzadə, during the period of the first Azerbaijani republic, claimed to have no objection to closer Azerbaijani-Israeli ties and further posited that “the basis for relations with Israel were laid by the Elçibəy authorities.”<sup>[xxiii]</sup> Qabil Hüseynli, the deputy leader of Müsavat Partiyası, noted that Azerbaijan’s close relations with Israel gave it access to the power of the “Jewish lobby [that] plays an important role in influencing the world’s big powers and directing the world’s media.”<sup>[xxiv]</sup> For Azerbaijan’s increasingly powerless opposition, it seemed that friendship with Israel would make Azerbaijani perspectives on the conflict more persuasive in Brussels and Washington:

*We are faced with a state that has a lobby like Armenia and has opportunities to influence world public opinion. In these conditions, we need the support of Israel. I believe that dual relations will serve to increase security in the region.*<sup>[xxv]</sup>

An official in Ümid Partiyası, Nəsimi Məmmədli, noted that “also, the interests of Israel and the Turkish States coincide in the information war on the so-called genocide claims raised by Armenians against Azerbaijanis and Turks.”<sup>[xxvi]</sup> Thus, Azerbaijan’s secular opposition, largely confined by the 2010s to Baku and removed from Azerbaijan’s governing institutions, sought to claim credit for the relationship with Israel that



gave Azerbaijan substantive assistance towards the goal of a military campaign in Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding regions. As witnessed in the divided reaction of Azerbaijanis to the 2021 Gaza war, Israeli support in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War of 2020 helped deepen support for Israel amongst the wider Azerbaijani public.<sup>[xxvii]</sup>

## **The Azerbaijani-Palestinian relationship**

Diplomatic relations between Azerbaijan and Palestine began on 15 April 1992, eight days after Azerbaijan established relations with Israel. Though Iranian authorities facilitated some encounters in the 1990s, such as the 8 December 1997 bilateral meeting between Azerbaijani president Heydər Əliyev and Palestinian president Yasser Arafat in Tehran, the inter-state relationship lacked economic or political substance in its own right. Visiting Azerbaijan in October 2009, Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad al-Malki expressed positivity towards the development of Azerbaijani-Palestinian relations and “called on the international community to take vigorous efforts to settle conflicts.”<sup>[xxviii]</sup> Palestine opened its embassy in Baku on 29 June 2011 during a visit of Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas to Azerbaijan.<sup>[xxix]</sup> In April 2017, on the occasion of the twenty-five year anniversary of diplomatic relations between Azerbaijan and Palestine, Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Elmar Məmmədyyarov noted “effective bilateral cooperation between our governments, as well as within the international organizations, in particular the OIC, gave an impetus to the development of relations between the two countries over the past 25 years,” tellingly hinting at how both states saw it in their interest to strategize together to secure support from wealthier and/or more powerful Muslim-majority states in their conflicts with Armenia and Israel.<sup>[xxx]</sup> Məmmədyyarov thanked Palestine for “support for the position of Azerbaijan and the resolutions condemning military aggression by Armenia against



Azerbaijan.”<sup>[xxxii]</sup>

On 21 November 2022, the Palestinian state news service, WAFA News Agency, commended the Azerbaijani government’s decision to “open a representative office in the State of Palestine” as “a step that reflects the solidarity of the Republic of Azerbaijan with Palestine and the rights of the Palestinian people.”<sup>[xxxiii]</sup> In early December 2022, the Palestinian ambassador to Azerbaijan, Nasir Abdul Karim, stated to pro-government REAL TV<sup>[xxxiii]</sup> that “we support Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity” and highlighted the long history of good relations between Azerbaijan and Palestine, including the 1997 meeting between Heydər Əliyev and Palestinian president Yasser Arafat.<sup>[xxxiv]</sup>

### **Azerbaijani public opinion on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict**

Publicly available data on Azerbaijani public opinion regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been very limited. In part, this is a result of the difficulties of conducting opinion research in Azerbaijan’s highly authoritarian political environment. A survey conducted by the Director of the Israel and Middle East Center at Azərbaycan Dillər Universiteti, Tural Əhmədov of undergraduate students in the university’s Regional Studies Department from 10 October to 15 November 2007, claimed that education on Israel and the Middle East made Azerbaijani youth more favorable to Israel. Among the undergraduate students surveyed studying Israel and the Middle East, the prevailing position was one of Azerbaijani neutrality towards the conflict and ambivalence to the Israeli and Palestinian causes. However, among the students with other regional focuses, 58,6 percent blamed Jews for “the onset and duration of the conflict.”<sup>[xxxv]</sup> While 27,6 percent of these students said the Azerbaijani government should “support Palestinians because they are fellow Muslims” compared to 4,6 percent who advocated support for Israel,

“66,1 percent of [these] respondents stated that the Azerbaijani government should take a neutral stance toward the conflict.”<sup>[xxxvi]</sup>

While it is clear that Əhmədov had an interest in demonstrating that his program promoted pro-Israel sentiment among Azerbaijani youth,<sup>[xxxvii]</sup> the premise of his survey—that even most Azerbaijani undergraduate students in Baku have pro-Palestinian leanings—hinted that a broader swathe of the Azerbaijani public may consider pan-Islamic solidarity a more salient politics than the substance of partnership with Israel.

In moments of escalation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Azerbaijanis more often have seen themselves in images of Palestinian casualties than in Israelis waiting out missile attacks in bomb shelters. In the June 2009 Gaza War, Israeli rocket attacks “produced a high level of anger and frustration among the ordinary people” in Azerbaijan, resulting in a “majority of the population strongly [condemning] the Israeli operation in Gaza.”<sup>[xxxviii]</sup> Flare-ups in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict seem to have a rallying effect that brings Azerbaijanis to sympathize with Palestinians, though there are indications this dynamic may have shifted in the post-2020 environment.<sup>[xxxix]</sup>

### **Karabakh and Palestine: Azerbaijani pan-Islamic diplomacy**

Just as the *Nakba* of 1948 and its memory have become integral aspects of a Palestinian national identity, so have the expulsions of 1992 and 1993 in the formation of an Azerbaijani national consciousness. Comparisons of these displacements played a role in Azerbaijani-Iranian bilateral dialogue in the 1990s and to Azerbaijani calls for solidarity at international fora, particularly those that involved other majority-Muslim states. The Palestinians represented the ultimate standard of dispossession amongst Muslims—a standard that Azerbaijanis

have used to define their own predicament resulting from catastrophe in the First Nagorno-Karabakh War.

At the seventh session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation on 12 June 1996, president Heydər Əliyev claimed that the suffering of internally displaced Azerbaijanis was unique in extremity:

*It is hardly possible to meet such horrors in any other country of the world, which are experienced by the citizens of Azerbaijan that have violently been expelled from their places of residence and have lived in tents for four or five years already. It, probably, can be met neither in Africa, nor in the Middle and the Near East, neither in Palestine, nor in Afghanistan.* [\[x1\]](#)

The uniqueness argument that Əliyev advanced in these remarks has its roots in debates on the uniqueness of the Holocaust and more immediately in the widespread recognition of the Armenian genocide.

This form of exceptionalism would prove especially important for Əliyev to convey at functions of the OIC, which would end up being the only multilateral organization to unambiguously support the Azerbaijani position on Karabakh. In a speech to the organization's summit in Casablanca, Morocco on 13 December 1994, Əliyev bemoaned how “as a result of long interstate wars” Azerbaijan had lost its independence and become subsumed into the Soviet Union, which in turn resulted in the suppression of Islam by Soviet authorities.

*I have told in my speech about the tribulations and sufferings of my people. At the same time, I am concerned about the pains and sufferings of other people in all the hotspots of the world irrespective of their national or religious identity, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kashmir, and Palestine.* [\[x1i\]](#)

Regardless of Əliyev's stated concern for all people

regardless of their religion, his linking of the plight of displaced Azerbaijanis to the plight of Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Indian-administered Kashmir, and Palestine created a clear thrust towards pan-Islamic solidarity on Karabakh.

Following in his predecessor father's footsteps, president İlham Əliyev has more recently described Karabakh in the same breath as Palestine in engagements with the OIC:

*We must admit that today the Islamic world is facing serious challenges and numerous problems that are waiting to be resolved. Among them are the Armenia-Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Palestine, and Kashmir, conflicts in the Middle East, the refugee crisis and other issues.*<sup>[xlii]</sup>

While avoiding an explicit reference to Palestinian suffering, repeating the connection between Karabakh and Palestine had no such ambiguity amongst predominantly Muslim audiences. Displaced Azerbaijanis, like Palestinians, were Muslim brothers and sisters in dire need of the support of the *umma*.

In the UN General Assembly, Azerbaijan has voted for resolutions condemning Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, most likely seeking to court the more numerous majority-Muslim states of the world in support of its resolutions on Nagorno-Karabakh.<sup>[xliii]</sup> The parallels that link the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to “the India-Pakistan and Arab-Israeli rivalries [include] features such as territorial contestation, inconclusive strategic interactions, diffusion across fractured regional environments, the involvement of great powers, and nation- and state-building processes under conditions of long-term, competitive militarization.”<sup>[xliv]</sup> These appeals and parallels indeed have resonances with a wide audience in the Islamic world, while also facing limitations. President Erdoğan, who has strongly backed Azerbaijan in his years in power, has taken to speaking at the UN General

Assembly against the injustices of Karabakh, Kashmir, and Palestine in the role to which he aspires as champion of the oppressed and of the Global South against neo-colonialism.<sup>[xlv]</sup> The Pakistani government officially rejects the Armenian genocide, has no diplomatic relations with Armenia, and does not recognize the Republic of Armenia as a state. Though Azerbaijani and Pakistani state interlocutors have often articulated solidarity with one another through metaphors between the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the Kashmir conflict between India and Pakistan, the discourse of this pan-Islamic solidarity remains rooted in Palestinian struggle. Aside from Armenia, the only other UN member state the Pakistani government does not recognize is Israel.<sup>[xlvi]</sup>

Beyond Pakistan and Turkey, the receptiveness of Muslim-majority states towards Azerbaijani pan-Islamic appeals has been mixed. In some Arab countries, particularly in the Levant and the Gulf regions, memory of late Ottoman state violence against Arabs and Armenians supersedes the *Nakba* metaphor. As Hanioglu noted, “anti-Ottoman sentiment [...] exacerbated by Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) policies, had spread throughout the Arab provinces” by 1918, “leaving pro-Ottoman Arabs a dwindling minority.”<sup>[xlvii]</sup> Conscription followed later by efforts to suppress the Arab revolt left a bitter taste for many Arabs. Although Azerbaijan was never part of the Ottoman Empire, the anti-Turkish resonances of this historical memory, greater hostility to Israel, and large Armenian diaspora communities diminishes the persuasiveness of Azerbaijan’s case to these countries.

This cleavage becomes most visible in comparing the positions of the OIC and the Arab League on Nagorno-Karabakh. While the OIC has never made the connection explicitly, it framed its support for Azerbaijan’s position on Nagorno-Karabakh on the basis of Muslim solidarity—a form of solidarity deeply molded by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Meanwhile, the Arab League has adopted a neutral approach, forcing both Armenian

and Azerbaijani diplomats to court its members' favor. While the Armenian government has sought to instrumentalize growing conflict between Arab states and Turkey to build ties (it recently gained observer status for the country), president Əliyev spoke to the Arab League summit in Algiers of the solidarity of Azerbaijanis with Algerians against their French colonial masters and implicitly with the struggle of Palestinians against Israel.<sup>[xlvi]</sup>

Saudi Arabia has sought in recent years to build partnerships with both countries, seeing Armenia as a bulwark against Turkey and viewing Azerbaijan as a partner against Iran. In August 2019, the Saudi ambassador to Azerbaijan, Hamad bin Abdullah bin Saud bin Khudair, told Azerbaijani media that "our position on [the] Palestinian and Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts is identical."<sup>[xli]</sup> Given the sense in Azerbaijan that international solidarity ignored the plight of Azerbaijani IDPs and inconsistently applied its moral force and international laws in Azerbaijan's conflict with Armenia, such equivalences legitimized Azerbaijani victimhood by validating its world historic significance on par with Palestinian suffering. That a Saudi diplomat would embrace such a strong position on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is a marker of the success of Azerbaijani pan-Islamic appeals over a more sanguine accounting of Saudi interests in the South Caucasus.<sup>[l]</sup>

Heydər Əliyev's foreign policy advisor Quluzadə complained that the Organization of Islamic Conference (renamed the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in 2011) summit held in Baku in June 2006 was essentially helpless to solve the problems of Muslim people from Nagorno-Karabakh to Palestine, for "the leaders of all Muslim countries in the world are under the influence of the United States and the West in general."<sup>[li]</sup> In the end, this disappointment with the meager fruits of Islamic solidarity on Karabakh would further push Azerbaijan to embrace Israeli partnership.

## **Müqavimət: Palestine in the Azerbaijani-Iranian relationship**

Beyond engagements with the OIC, attempts to tie together Karabakh and Palestine would mostly come through the diplomatic efforts of Muslim-majority states to court Azerbaijan, particularly in the context of Iranian engagements with Azerbaijani counterparts in the 1990s. Following the overthrow of the pan-Turkist Əbülfəz Elçibəy, who had tense relations with Iran, Iranian authorities sought to cultivate good ties with Heydər Əliyev. Balancing the good relations they enjoyed with the Armenian state, they at times, exceedingly carefully, crafted their official rhetoric of solidarity with Palestinians and enmity with Israel to express solidarity with Azerbaijanis.

On 28 October 1993, during a visit to Baku, Iranian president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani expressed his desire that Azerbaijani refugees from the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict follow the lead of Palestinians in rejecting a permanent refugee status.<sup>[lii]</sup> While offering that Azerbaijani refugees could in due time become fully-integrated citizens of Iran, the Iranian president claimed that Azerbaijanis would do well to absorb Palestinian revolutionary politics of *müqavimət* and never accept defeat.

Four years later, Iranian officials organized a meeting between president Heydər Əliyev and Palestinian Liberation Organization Chairman Yasser Arafat in Tehran on 8 December 1997. The two leaders exchanged messages of support for each other's struggles. "I point out that Azerbaijan is a friend of Palestine. The independent Republic of Azerbaijan has always supported and will continue to support the heroic [qəhrəman] struggle of the Palestinian people," said Əliyev, dropping the subtlety of his rhetoric at the OIC.<sup>[liii]</sup> Underscoring how the OIC had become a foreground for pitching pan-Islamic solidarity on Nagorno-Karabakh and Palestine, the release from the Arafat-Əliyev summit closed with Arafat's statement of confidence that "that the eighth summit of the Organization of



the Islamic Conference will play an important role in further strengthening the unity of the Muslim world.”<sup>[liv]</sup>

Growing Azerbaijani-Israeli ties, however, put a damper on Iranian willingness to see Karabakh and Palestine through the same lens. In a visit of Heydər Əliyev to Tehran on 18 May 2002, an agent of the press, considering that “Iran calls for the defense of the Palestinians and to put an end to the relations with Israel,” asked Iranian president Mohammad Khatami at a joint press conference with president Heydər Əliyev, “can we expect a similar position on the issue of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh from Iran?” Khatami responded that he had anticipated the question and that he condemned Armenian aggression against Azerbaijan.

*Of course, we are concerned that the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over the Mountainous-Garabagh is still not resolved, but the events going on in Palestine are an unprecedented and inhumane tragedy. It cannot be compared with other events. The occupation of the land is one issue, but the murder of women and children living on that land is a different issue. The world gives special attention to this event and apparently, this tragedy cannot be tolerated.*<sup>[lv]</sup>

In the subsequent two decades, Iranian state rhetoric has increasingly refrained from listing Karabakh in the same list of pan-Islamic struggles as Palestine.<sup>[lvi]</sup> With the Azerbaijani government gravitating towards closer cooperation with Israel, Karabakh-Palestine *müqavimət* politics ended at the state official level for Azerbaijan and Iran, though Palestinian diplomats and Azerbaijani Islamists would carry on its banner.

### **Against occupiers: communicating Palestinian solidarity to Azerbaijani audiences**

Against the current of deepening Azerbaijani-Israeli ties, the Palestinian embassy in Baku has attempted to keep the flame of the earlier efforts at pan-Islamic solidarity bridging

Karabakh and Palestine. In this effort, it often repurposes Azerbaijani rhetoric on Karabakh to solicit support for Palestinians. For example, the Palestinian embassy in Baku takes care to define Palestine as “the occupied Palestine state [işğal edilmiş Fələstin dövləti]” and to Israel as “occupier state [işğalçı dövlət]” to echo the widely-used terms used in Azerbaijan with reference to “occupied Azerbaijani territories [Azərbaycanın işğal olunmuş əraziləri]” and to the Armenian state.<sup>[lvii]</sup> The embassy condemned Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for “lying, historical falsification, and racist incitement [yalan, tarixi saxtalaşdırma və irqçi təhrikçilik]” and the anti-Turkish Twitter posts of his son, Yair.<sup>[lviii]</sup>

Ultimately, as a result of regional alignments that placed Iran and Palestine against Azerbaijan and Israel, the Palestinian embassy, more often than building solidarity between Azerbaijanis and Palestinians, must defend accusations of Palestinian support for Armenia. In May 2021, during the crisis between Israel and Palestinian militants in Gaza, the Palestinian embassy in Baku sought to dismiss “disinformation” that Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas had expressed support for Armenian territorial claims in a Christmas visit to Armenians in Bethlehem.<sup>[lix]</sup>

Responding to an article published on a website associated with the Milli Cəbhə Partiyası of Razi Nurullayev, a splinter of the Azərbaycan Xalq Cəbhəsi Partiyası (AXCP), entitled “Whom may we trust? Muslim countries that support the occupier Armenia,” the Palestinian embassy categorically denied parallels or sympathies between Palestinian militancy and Armenian separatism in Nagorno-Karabakh:

- 1. Palestine is not a separatist movement separated from Israel; it is a state occupied by Israel. Palestine existed before the creation of the state of Israel, and*

many of its historical leaders who emigrated to Palestine were happy to carry passports and certificates in the name of Palestine.

2. International law and more than 80 resolutions adopted by the UN indicate that Israel has illegally invaded Palestine. It is not necessary to conflate events.
3. It is the Republic of Azerbaijan, not Armenia, that supports Palestine, and after gaining independence, it is recognized as a state and Palestine appreciates it very highly.
4. Apparently, the author of the article was very confused since there are no Armenians fighting in Palestine from the organization 'ASALA.' ASALA is a terrorist organization that existed before Azerbaijan became independent and targeted Turkish diplomats. As is well known, Palestinian and Turkish relations have been very strong throughout history, which in itself proves that the opinions around ASALA's fighting in Palestine are false.
5. Neither the Palestinian state nor the parliament recognize the so-called 'Armenian genocide,' and this topic has not been discussed anywhere in Palestine in the past, now and in the future ... Interestingly, the author does not mention the fact that the Israeli parliament (the Knesset) previously and now periodically discusses the fictional 'Armenian genocide,' and a large number of Israeli politicians and leaders demanded to recognize the fictional 'Armenian genocide.' For example, the current President of Israel, Reuven Rivlin, is one of them. [\[1x\]](#)

The first two points dismissed assumptions of the similarity between Armenian and Palestinian state-building projects. Echoing a strain of Azerbaijani historiography that denied authentic or relevant experience of Armenian statehood in the Caucasus (and sometimes more broadly), they claimed that

Palestine existed long before Israeli occupation. The following claim, that “international law and the UN” back Palestine’s position, pitched promoting international law against occupation and for territorial integrity as a basis for Azerbaijani-Palestinian understanding.

The subsequent three points of the response, tellingly longer and more numerous than those that rejected Armenian-Palestinian parallels, denied accusations of mutual support between Armenia and Palestine. The embassy highlighted Azerbaijani support for Palestine and dismissed the significance of Armenian support. It disavowed the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA), whose strong base in Lebanon during the civil war and links to Iran put it on the frontlines of Arab struggle against Israel and its Lebanese allies after the latter’s 1982 intervention into southern Lebanon.<sup>[1xi]</sup> Rejecting this politics of anti-Israeli, anti-Turkish Armenian resistance, the embassy instead emphasized the strong historical ties between Turks and Palestine. The post ended by pointing the finger instead at Israeli politicians, including then-president Reuven Rivlin, who demanded official recognition by their state of the Armenian genocide, and claiming that never had any party in Palestine contemplated such a recognition of the “fictional [qondarma] Armenian genocide.”

For all the pointed connections drawn by the embassy for a politics of solidarity between Azerbaijanis and Palestinians, Azerbaijani officials would not sacrifice their relationship with Israel by echoing their rhetoric in such clear terms. Within the system of Azerbaijani official discourse, only Allahşükür Paşazadə, the state-appointed Şeyxülislam and Grand Mufti of Caucasus Muslims, has in the past decade sought to recognize Palestinian suffering. On 11 July 2013, the start of Ramadan that year, Paşazadə exhorted Azerbaijani Muslims to hold the fast by considering how in “Syria, Palestine, and Iraq, there are Muslims who are experiencing terrors every day

and are preparing for this month with joy at the cost of their lives.”<sup>[lxii]</sup> However, this statement did not reflect a lasting ideological commitment to Palestine over Israel. While Paşazadə described in positive terms his meeting with then newly-appointed Israeli ambassador George Deek on 10 February 2021, he also has referenced with gratitude the alleged support of Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei for Azerbaijani sovereignty over Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding regions.<sup>[lxiii]</sup> The mantle of Azerbaijani *müqavimət* would be taken up by dissident Azerbaijani Islamists.

### **Azerbaijani-Palestinian solidarity amongst Azerbaijani Islamists**

Among those discordant with the double-sided rhetoric of state Islam in Azerbaijan are the Iranian-inspired Müsəlman Birliyi Harekatı (MBH), an Islamist formation led by the imprisoned activist Hacı Taleh Bağırzadə Bağırzadə, whose last base was Nardaran, a “poor, heavily religious village northeast of Baku,” received religious training in Iran.<sup>[lxiv]</sup> A successor to the Azərbaycan İslam Partiyası, banned by Azerbaijani authorities in 1995, Bağırzadə’s MBH is the vanguard of Shi’a Islamism in Azerbaijan today.<sup>[lxv]</sup> As a result of his agitation against the authoritarian tendencies of the Əliyev regime and endemic corruption, Bağırzadə has remained under arrest since 26 November 2015, “when government forces entered the village [of Nardaran] and opened fire on a home where people were gathered for prayer” in a bid to suppress the movement.<sup>[lxvi]</sup> Azerbaijani authorities accuse MBH of plotting “a violent change to the constitutional system of government” and “a religious state governed by Sharia law.”<sup>[lxvii]</sup> Police checkpoints line Nardaran to this day, requiring visitors seeking to enter the municipality to provide an express invitation of a Nardaran resident.<sup>[lxviii]</sup>

MBH has been the only political force in Azerbaijan

proactively engaged in building Azerbaijani-Palestinian solidarity. In commemoration of Quds Day on 20 May 2022, MBH's official Facebook page declared the following:

*Qüds Day does not belong only to Palestine or a mere geographical understanding. Qüds Day is a symbol of all occupied lands, including Karabakh. So the day of Qüds is also the day of Şuşa for us. [...] The most painful question is, how was Jerusalem occupied, Karabakh occupied and other lands occupied? How did that go wrong? Why did we get away from unity and totality? Why were we surprised? [...] The reason for Jerusalem, Karabakh and all other occupations and usurpations can be explained by political, economic, historical circumstances and reasons. But the main reason is that at first the religious principles and values were taken away from the Muslims, and then the lands. And now, in order to reclaim Jerusalem, Karabakh, and all the losses, first of all, it is necessary to return the foundations of that belief, values and show loyalty to them practically. [...] We pray to God for these truths to take their place in the way our people live. So that soon the usurper and the fictional Israel and Nagorno-Karabakh regime, the occupying Armenia and their supporters may be deservedly punished and the voices of the call to prayer are heard in Karabakh and Jerusalem, so that our nation, our people can restore their glorious high position. Amin!*<sup>[lxix]</sup>

During the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, MBH praised the solidarity of Iranian Ayatollah Makarim Shirazi with Azerbaijani Muslims in their struggle with Armenians over Karabakh. A statement attributed to Bağırzadə, the MBH leader, reflecting how Azerbaijanis sympathized with the victims of Israeli bombings in Gaza, specifically drew a connection between the victims of Armenian bombing in Gəncə and pan-Islamic victimhood:

*After all, babies who were oppressed in Gəncə are no different from children who were bombed in Yemen, Palestine, Syria and other Islamic geography. Therefore, the whole world must hear*

*and hear the Karabakh cry of the Islamic umma. Let the Islamic world be one, the Muslim lands free and the souls of our martyrs happy.* <sup>[lxx]</sup>

While MBH has been at the forefront of crafting Azerbaijani-Palestinian solidarity, it retains traction in Azerbaijani Sunni Islamist circles as well. In June 2016, at the Sunni Cümə məscidi in central Baku, Islamists organized a conference on the theme “Don’t forget Karabakh and Jerusalem!” <sup>[lxxi]</sup> The organizers noted sessions on “the parallels between [the situations in] Jerusalem and Karabakh.” <sup>[lxxii]</sup>

The general Iranian alignment of explicitly pro-Palestinian Islamist groups such as MBH combined with the generally secular character of Azerbaijani society has made the discourse of *müqavimət* a political target. Fərid Mirzəli of Topçubaşov Mərkəzi, a Baku-based think-tank, characterized the “axis of resistance [*müqavimət oxu*],” uniting Iran, Syria, and militants based in Iraq, Palestine, and Syria, as threatening to Azerbaijan. <sup>[lxxiii]</sup> To many Azerbaijanis, *müqavimət* and Palestine draw Azerbaijan into the universe of Iranian theocratic hegemony and away from the secular Azerbaijani national project.

The linkages between Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Nagorno-Karabakh have notably provoked calls from some for more direct intervention of actors across these two conflicts. Lionid Nersisyan and Lara Setrakian, an Armenian political analyst and an Armenian American journalist, respectively, pitch Israeli diplomacy as a potential constructive mediator between the governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan, presumably on the basis of both the parallel histories of Armenians and Jews and close Israeli ties with the Azerbaijani government. <sup>[lxxiv]</sup> Just as plausibly, Azerbaijani news website Konkret.az pitched president İlham Əliyev as being equipped to bring peace between Israelis and Palestinians in the wake of



warming ties between Israel and Turkey. [\[lxxv\]](#)

## Conclusion

It was the failure of pan-Islamic solidarity to deliver substantive support for Azerbaijan's cause and the eagerness of Israel to establish close economic and political ties with a fellow rival of Iran that suppressed official Azerbaijani-Palestinian solidarity. Nevertheless, continued references to Azerbaijani-Palestinian solidarity demonstrate the limits of Azerbaijani-Israeli partnership outside of the Əliyev administration. To many Azerbaijanis, Palestinians are Muslim brothers and sisters, while Israelis are valued friends. These categories, while artificial, represent a significant and long-term distinction.

Much more work remains to be done on how Armenians understand the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh through Israel-Palestine. Partly, this is a result of Armenian diplomacy's more limited ambitions as well as Armenia's official non-recognition of Palestine. However, more scholarship should proceed forward using Armenian language sources that are not accessible to me. Another aspect of this subject that deserves further scholarly attention are the way that new construction developments in regions in and around Nagorno-Karabakh constructed by the Azerbaijani government in contract with building companies mimic some aspects of Israeli messaging regarding settlements in the West Bank. The Azerbaijani government and associated private enterprises understand these new constructions and restorations in these territories that came under Baku's control in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war as progressive and developing land that Armenians, according to them, looted, mismanaged, or otherwise failed to make productive. A similar emphasis on the logics of productivity, economic development, and increasing sustainability pervade Israeli discourse around Jewish settlement in the occupied West Bank. Armenian settlements in the seven occupied regions of Azerbaijan surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh should be similarly examined.

## Images



An Azerbaijani stamp commemorating the 3000-year anniversary of the founding of Jerusalem uses the city's Hebrew name (Yerusəlim, from יְרוּשָׁלַיִם) rather than the Arabic (Qüds, from القدس) which is more common colloquially in Azerbaijan. The three stamps depict the Dome of the Rock (highest point, at 300m), the aedicule of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (lower, at 250m), and the Wailing Wall (lowest, at 100m).





Palestine in Azerbaijan - Fələstin Azərbaycanca

26 April · 🌐

ŞƏRHSİZ....

İsraildə



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A post from the Facebook account of the Palestinian Embassy in Baku, Azerbaijan labeled “without comment” depicting photographs of protestors in Israel flying Israeli, Armenian, and Karabakh Armenian flags with placards on the Armenian genocide (26 April 2022).

(Palestine in Azerbaijan - Fələstin Azərbaycanca, “ŞƏRHSİZ,”  
Facebook, 26 April 2022  
<https://www.facebook.com/palestinembass.baku/posts/pfbid0R5mNZ>

STa3mW2zT4fiocZdLkpM5sd9yaPk712mRydPmXXtegHbWuRrQs9hKYqNyxAl ).



Azerbaijani president Heydər Əliyev meeting with Palestinian president Yasser Arafat on 8 December 1997 in Tehran.

(“Azərbaycan Prezidenti Heydər Əliyevin Fələstin rəhbəri Yasir Ərəfat ilə görüşdəki söhbətdən,” “Heydər Əliyev İrsi” Beynəlxalq Elektron Kitabxana, 8 December 1997, <https://lib.aliyev-heritage.org/az/7786071.html>)





Flags at the entrance of the Karabakh Victory Hotel in Şuşa

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[lix] Palestine in Azerbaijan – Fələstin Azərbaycanı, “İsrail tərəfdarları insanların ərəb dilinin bilməməsindən sui-istifadə edərək İsrail işğalçı ordusunun törətdiyi cinayətlərdən diqqətləri yayındırmaq üçün İsrailin uğursuz propaqandasını (HASBARA) yaymağa çalışır,” Facebook, 15 May 2021, <https://fb.watch/hnho4ckxVQ/> (Accessed: 5 January 2023).

[lx] Palestine in Azerbaijan – Fələstin Azərbaycanı, “‘Gülünə yalanlara digər bir misal,’” Facebook, 23 January 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/palestinembassy.baku/posts/pfbid0zfjwbNUaC1z4LY8CpUpAT82NLLqYYhZ1xm8cRrRJ5k1gNEKVBv4mdoHdDC7cuEYL> (Accessed: 5 January 2023).

[lxi] Bruce Hoffman, “Recent Trends in Palestinian Terrorism,” RAND Corporation, May 1984, <https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/papers/2005/P6981.pdf> (Accessed: 5 January 2023). The transnational politics of those who, like the Armenian American Monte Melkonian fought Israeli-backed Phalange in Lebanon and later Azerbaijani forces in Nagorno-Karabakh, deserves further scholarship.

[lxii] Allahşükür Paşazadə, “Kimsə bu Ramazanda oruc tutmaqdan...” Facebook, 11 July 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/SeyxulislamHaciAllahsukurPasazade/posts/pfbid02mjU7PkyqVKTESTGSVwrqs9h7MkazmGbBtBWxkAz74VXKJGysHBMEcJz7K3vg1S3Cl> (Accessed: 5 January 2023).



[lxiii] Allahşükür Paşazadə, “Fevralın 10-da Qafqaz Müsəlmanları İdarəsinin sədri Şeyxülislam Allahşükür Paşazadə İsrailin Azərbaycan Respublikasındakı yeni təyin olunmuş Fövqəladə və Səlahiyyətli səfiri Corc Diki qəbul etdi,” Facebook, 10 February 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/SeyxulislamHaciAllahsukurPasazade/posts/pfbid02QdDub63NJdfq6DgFSHfC8DBKtT69SmNkPeKfbqGVyqS4MgRWiUnqYJqbTPptmWbrl> (Accessed: 5 January 2023); Allahşükür Paşazadə, “İran İslam Respublikasının dini lideri Ayətullah Əli Xameneyi Məhəmməd peyğəmbərin mövludu münasibətilə 3 noyabr müraciətində bunları bildirib,” Facebook, 3 November 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/SeyxulislamHaciAllahsukurPasazade/posts/pfbid02dKxJZ3quFHfQ5bjWyjU3zogJy46vzizV8a6jEWBwB4kCXXMh1wyQN9eGtj4MfQLdl> (Accessed: 5 January 2023).

[lxiv] Altstadt 199.

[lxv] Altstadt 203-4.

[lxvi] Altstadt 204.

[lxvii] Altstadt 204.

[lxviii] “Azerbaijani government to compensate detainees during ‘Nardaran events,’” JAMnews, February 9, 2023, <https://jam-news.net/echr-and-the-nardaran-events/> (Accessed 13 April 2023).

[lxix] Müsəlman Birliyi Hərəkatı, “Beynəlxalq Qüds Gülü ilə bağlı,” Facebook, 4 August 2020, <https://fb.watch/hHxxFGW4ah/> (Accessed: 5 January 2023). This post has since been deleted.

[lxx] Müsəlman Birliyi Hərəkatı, “İlahiyyatçı Tale Bağırzadə Ayətullah Makarim Şiraziyə təşəkkür etdi,” Facebook, 20 October 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/MBH.MuselmanBirliyiHerakati/posts/pfbid02KRarr5pkJzd96xX8Fe9nzcjyUBYAzKLD3Q4vghHx5VPS5szX7vTkwzKgPv>

XeehUML (Accessed: 5 January 2023). This post has since been deleted.

[lxxi] “İçərişəhər ‘Cümə’ məscidinin dini icması və DEVAMM ‘Qarabağı və Qüdsü unutma!’ mövzusunda konfrans keçirdi,” Xeber.nur.az, 2 July 2016, <https://xeber.nur-az.com/32756/> (Accessed: 5 January 2023).

[lxxii] Ibid.

[lxxiii] Fərid Mirzəli, “‘Müqavimət oxu’ yenidən birləşir: HƏMAS üçün maraqlar ideologiyadan üstün olacaq?” Topçubaşov Mərkəzi, 12 December 2022, <https://top-center.org/az/tehlil/3453/muqavimet-oxu-yeniden-birllesir-hemas-ucun-maraqlar-ideologiyadan-ustun-olacaq> (Accessed: 5 January 2023).

[lxxiv] Leonid Nersisyan and Lara Setrakian, “Israel should mediate between Armenia, Azerbaijan,” *Jerusalem Post*, 15 September 2022, <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/article-717164> (Accessed: 5 January 2023). Less than convincing is their claim that “Israel should want the peace and stability that Armenians, among others, profoundly crave.”

[lxxv] “‘İsrail və Fələstin arasında barışiq üçün İlham Əliyev vasitəçi ola bilər,’” Konkret.az, 15 May 2021, <https://konkret.az/israil-ve-felestin-arasinda-barisiq-ucun-ilham-eliyev-vasiteci-ola-biler-politoloq/?fbclid=IwAR30675k5UQh4ZDUqgIgbuoSM7LRkAajVXlXUswNPycSbN4jp56wH8mAEho> (Accessed: 5 January 2023).