

# Between Turkey and Israel: Azerbaijan's Strategic Dilemma and a Potential Opening for Moscow

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Since 1992, Azerbaijan and Türkiye have been close allies. Yet relations between the two countries have occasionally experienced setbacks. In 1995, for instance, Azerbaijan accused certain Turkish citizens, allegedly connected to Turkish intelligence and security forces, of supporting a failed coup against then President Heydar Aliyev. In 2008, tensions briefly resurfaced over the Geneva accords aimed at normalizing relations between Türkiye and Armenia. More recently, frictions emerged when Turkish President Erdoğan, in several speeches, emphasized Türkiye's role in Azerbaijan's victory in the 2020 Karabakh War. However, the latest quarrel between the two sides, following President İlham Aliyev's harsh verbal response to an Iranian drone strike in Azerbaijan, appears more serious. This article argues that the current tensions reflect a deeper divergence in how Ankara and Baku perceive regional threats, particularly with regard to Israel and Iran. This divergence, in turn, may weaken their strategic alignment and create an opportunity for Russia to reassert its influence in the South Caucasus.

## What Happened?

After the death of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei on March 4, 2026, President Aliyev visited the Iranian embassy in Baku to offer his condolences. For several reasons, he appeared keen to avoid involvement in the conflict. However, the following day Iran carried out a drone strike on Azerbaijan's Nakhchivan region, wounding several people. In

response, Aliyev delivered a speech in which he accused Iran in very harsh terms. This reaction, however, triggered a strong backlash in Turkish media. Azerbaijani MPs loyal to Aliyev accused media outlets linked to Erdoğan's circle of orchestrating a media campaign against the Aliyev administration. These criticisms ranged from highlighting Aliyev's close ties with Israel to pointing to the entrenched authoritarian nature of governance in Azerbaijan, an issue that Turkish authorities had long overlooked.

Shortly afterward, the Iranian side sent mixed signals regarding the attack. Iranian officials, including President Pezeshkian, denied any involvement, while some Iranian pro-government commentators described the strike as a warning to Azerbaijan. Meanwhile, both the Azerbaijani government and opposition figures used the drone attack to revive irredentist rhetoric aimed at Iran's northern territories.[\[i\]](#)

Nevertheless, Aliyev soon backtracked. He congratulated the newly elected Supreme Leader of Iran and sent humanitarian aid. This rapid shift suggests that pressure from Türkiye may have influenced his change in tone.

### **Between Two Fires: Diverging Threat Perceptions**

The Erdoğan government appears concerned that Israel could draw Azerbaijan into a broader regional confrontation with Iran, thereby also increasing the risk of Türkiye's involvement. As a result, Türkiye, which seeks to avoid direct entanglement, increasingly views Israel's regional conduct as a potential threat to its own interests. In this context, Aliyev appears to be balancing competing strategic pressures.

It is important to note that both Israel and Türkiye supported Azerbaijan in the recent Karabakh war. Although Turkish involvement was more direct and decisive—Erdoğan stood alongside Aliyev at the victory parade, and Turkish military advisors played a key role in Azerbaijan's success—Aliyev's relations with Israel remain crucial. This relationship is

rooted in a long-standing strategic partnership based on energy, defense, and intelligence cooperation. Azerbaijan has been one of Israel's key energy suppliers, providing a significant share of its oil imports, while Israel has played a central role in modernizing Azerbaijan's military, particularly through drone technology and advanced weapons systems. Azerbaijan's geographic proximity to Iran has also made it strategically valuable for Israel in terms of intelligence and regional positioning. Alongside major Western economic actors such as BP, Israeli networks have been among the most important international backers of President Ilham Aliyev's rule. This support is particularly significant given the Azerbaijani government's authoritarian image and its vulnerability on the global stage. This multidimensional partnership explains why ties with Israel are not merely tactical but form a structural pillar of Azerbaijan's foreign policy.

In the current situation, Turkish pro-government media have increasingly signaled dissatisfaction, expecting Azerbaijan to demonstrate that its relationship with Türkiye takes precedence over its ties with Israel. What emerges is not only a short-term disagreement but a deeper structural tension within Azerbaijan's long-standing strategy of balancing external partners. While Türkiye provides a regional security anchor, Israel offers international leverage and strategic flexibility. However, the current crisis suggests that maintaining this balance is becoming more difficult.

### **Why This Matters**

During World War I and the Russian revolutions, the Ottoman government supported the idea of Azerbaijani independence and contributed significantly to the creation of the Azerbaijani republic. However, the situation changed after the Ottoman defeat in the war. Atatürk, who allied with Russia against the West, became a gravedigger of Azerbaijani independence. Unlike the Ottoman government, his movement cut its support for the

Azerbaijani republic and united with Russia against a common enemy, namely the West. The Ottoman Empire had worked to create a buffer zone between itself and Russia; however, Atatürk's Türkiye abandoned this idea and accepted Russia's claims to these territories, as an alliance with Russia was considered more important in confronting Western powers. As a result, the newly created republics of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia lost their independence, in a broader context of shifting great-power alignments in which Azerbaijan's loss of Turkish backing was one important factor. Western powers such as Britain withdrew from the region rather than confront Russia.

If the divergence between Ankara and Baku deepens, it could open a new geopolitical phase in the Caucasus. With the United States seeking to reduce its involvement in Ukraine, Russia may gradually redirect attention toward the region. A weakening of Turkish–Azerbaijani alignment could create an opening for Moscow to reassert influence. While the United States remains an important global actor, its direct role in the South Caucasus has been limited. As previous crises—such as the 2008 war in Georgia and the 2020 Karabakh war—demonstrate, Washington has shown little willingness to engage directly in regional conflicts, relying instead on indirect influence through partners. In this context, a weakening of Turkey's role would not necessarily be offset by increased US involvement.

However, it should be underlined that there have recently been signs of growing US interest in the region, particularly in the context of the Azerbaijan–Armenia peace process and connectivity initiatives such as the so-called TRIPP corridor, which could link Central Asia to Europe via the South Caucasus. Nevertheless, this engagement remains fragile and largely conditional. While Washington appears interested in strengthening its presence in Central Asia—where such projects are strategically important—its willingness to act decisively in the South Caucasus remains uncertain. In a scenario where

Turkish commitment weakens and Russia moves to reassert its influence, these emerging initiatives could be jeopardized, limiting the scope for sustained US involvement in the region.

### **Strained Azerbaijani–Russian Relations**

Until recently, Aliyev maintained relatively good relations with Russia and at times used them as a counterbalance to Türkiye, for example through close personal ties with Putin. Türkiye remained wary of this potential drift toward Moscow. However, the situation has changed significantly. Azerbaijan has recently adopted a much more critical tone toward Russia. At the same time, due to the war in Ukraine, Moscow appears to be avoiding further escalation with Baku. Nevertheless, Russian pro-government media coverage indicates growing dissatisfaction with Aliyev.

Although Russia currently lacks the capacity to launch a major military campaign in the South Caucasus, it continues to pursue its long-term geopolitical ambitions in its near abroad. Historical experience suggests that such ambitions should not be underestimated. For example, although Russia lost the Crimean War in the 1850s, it returned to confront the Ottoman Empire successfully only two decades later.

### **Conclusion**

Developments of this kind should not be dismissed as unrealistic, particularly in a period of rapidly shifting geopolitical alignments. International relations are evolving in unpredictable ways. We are living in a highly turbulent period in which strategic calculations are being reassessed and reorganized. In such an environment, even unlikely scenarios deserve serious consideration. The current tensions between Ankara and Baku, if they deepen, may therefore signal not merely a temporary disagreement but a more profound strategic shift, one that could reshape the balance of power in the South Caucasus.

In this sense, the historical parallels outlined above are not merely illustrative but point to a recurring structural pattern: when external balancing mechanisms weaken, the South Caucasus becomes more vulnerable to shifts in great-power influence. The current trajectory of Azerbaijani–Turkish relations suggests that such a moment may be emerging once again.

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[\[i\]](#) This refers to the notion, present in Azerbaijani political discourse, that Azerbaijani-populated regions in northern Iran (“South Azerbaijan”) share cultural and linguistic ties with the Republic of Azerbaijan and were divided between Iran and Russia in the nineteenth century.