

Did Azerbaijan Foot Mongolia's Lobbying Bill In the US?

written by Munkhnaran Bayarlkhagva Munxnaran Bayarlxaqva

On 26 November 2019, at a wrestling tournament dedicated to Mongolia's Republic Day, Mongolians witnessed a peculiar guest standing behind President Battulga Khaltmaa. That guest was Saeid Mollaei, a World Champion Judoka from Iran, who only months before turning up in Mongolia, had fled his home country after being forced by his trainer to lose a bout in order to avoid wrestling Israeli Sagi Muki. Soon afterward, the reason for Saeid Mollaei's presence in Ulaanbaatar was revealed—[he had been granted Mongolian citizenship](#), which only the President of Mongolia has the right to extend.

Normally, Mollaei would lose Olympic qualification points with a change of citizenship; however, the International Judo Federation (IJF) Executive committee reserves the right to consider special cases and decide whether the athlete would keep his ranking points. Despite competing in only 2 Olympic qualification events under the Mongolian flag, Mollaei qualified to compete in Tokyo in 2021 with over 5023 points and ranked sixth in the world, and IJF President Marius Vizer afterwards assured that the committee would do its [best to protect his results](#). IJF indeed allowed Mollaei to keep his points. At the Tokyo Olympics, Mollaei won a silver medal for Mongolia. He then changed citizenship again, switching to Azerbaijan in 2022.

The journey of an ethnic Azeri judoka from Iran, fleeing his country for political reasons and taking the citizenship of a country often despised by Iranians, Mongolia, winning an Olympic medal while keeping his friendship with a judoka from Iran's arch-enemy, Israel, is a script not even Hollywood

screenwriters could come up with. But what makes it even more special is what Mollaei's story hints at.

To put it straight, Mongolia, prior to Mollaei, has not naturalized any person for sports purposes; the country does not have a government policy or a budget for sports naturalization. On the flipside, Mongolia lost several athletes to countries such as the [UAE](#) and Kazakhstan in the run-up to Tokyo Olympics. At the same time, Mongolian politicians know very little about West Asian geopolitics and are generally oblivious to human rights concerns or refugees. Instead, they prefer to concentrate on domestic issues. Hence, the naturalization of Saeid Mollaei was entirely unexpected, and it almost certainly wasn't Mongolia's idea to fetch him from under the nose of another more expected destination like Azerbaijan. During his stint as a Mongolian citizen, Saied Mollaei rarely trained with Mongolia's national team, and lived mostly in Germany. It was obvious that Mongolia was not bearing the costs for sustaining Mollaei's time in Germany, and that there were other interests pushing Mollaei in the desired direction. So why did Mongolia offer him citizenship and what was happening in the background that saw Saeid Mollaei eventually become an Azerbaijani citizen?

Battulga Khaltmaa, a former Sambo World Champion and the head of Mongolia's Judo Federation, and a friend of Marius Vizer as well as Vladimir Putin, was elected President of Mongolia in 2017. A well-known anti-China and pro-Russia figure of Mongolian politics, one of the key objectives of his presidency was to get the "Mongolia Third Neighbor Trade Act" passed in the United States. The bill would allow the duty-free entry of Mongolian cashmere produce into the US, and was designed to strengthen Mongolia's [democracy and women's employment](#). Between the 2018 and 2021 the bill was introduced to the Congress a [total three times](#), but was ultimately dropped once Battulga was term-limited in 2021.

During Battulga's tenure, the key vehicle for promoting the

[Mongolia Third Neighbor Trade Act](#) on Washington, DC was a non-profit named *Mongolia Tomorrow Coalition*. On its now-defunct website, the Mongolia Tomorrow Coalition says that it was funded by donations from [within the US and Mongolia](#). The Government of Mongolia provided no direct funding for the lobbying was probably because of divisive domestic politics: Battulga won the presidency as a candidate of the opposition Democratic Party against China's preferred candidate from the ruling Mongolian People's Party. Contrary to popular belief, Battulga himself is not a particularly rich man who could fund prolonged lobbying efforts in Washington, DC out of his own pocket. Hence, we are left with the question: "where did the money come from?"

Some of the lobbying efforts were likely funded from donations from Mongolia: the largest cashmere producers in the country, namely the Gobi Corporation and Evseg Cashmere, are the usual suspects since they would most benefit from the proposed US trade deal. For example, the Gobi Corporation's owner and Chairman Baatarsaikhan Tsagaach [travelled to the US](#) as a part of the delegation during Battulga's 2019 visit to the US. In 2021 the outgoing President Battulga awarded the chairmen of Gobi and Evseg with the title [Hero of Labor](#), perhaps a commensurate repayment since the bill in the US would not be lobbied further.

Although we do not know any factual information about "US donations" to Mongolian lobbying efforts, we may garner insights from the spending of the Mongolia Tomorrow Coalition. Of the lobbying companies hired by the Mongolia Tomorrow Coalition, the overwhelming majority of the money [was spent on Keystone Strategy & Advisory](#), which was founded by American-Jewish lobbyist Aryeh Mittleman. The Foreign Agents Registration data available on the nonprofit organization OpenSecrets' website [shows us that](#) during the 2018 and 2019 engagements with the Mongolia Tomorrow Coalition, Mittleman did not receive any other paid engagements.

Yet, double-checking on the Foreign Agents Registration Act's (FARA) database reveals something more nuanced. The FARA reports to Congress during 2018 and 2019 do not contain the name Aryeh Mittleman. His name is only found in the 2017 filings where Aryeh Mittleman was listed as a lobbyist for Keystone Strategic Advisors LLC, which at the time was co-owned by Mittleman. He later [transferred his stake](#) to his business partner and the ex-Ambassador of Serbia to the US, Vladimir Petrovic. The client of the duo for 2017 was the Government of Eastern Libya controlled by General Khalifa Haftar. A [2017 Politico article](#) on Keystone's engagement with Haftar, however, gives slightly different spelling of Mittleman's first name as "Ari" and refers to him as former aide to Senator Bob Casey of Pennsylvania.

The name Ari Mittleman on the other hand appears much more often on FARA reports. The very same 2017 report lists both "Ari" and "Aryeh" side by side, and a quick online search shows that his full name is [Aryeh Eliezer Mittleman](#). Mittleman's [social media activity](#) and [personal website](#) also prove that Ari Mittleman is the same Aryeh Mittleman who was engaged by the Mongolia Tomorrow Coalition. Notably, the FARA reports of 2018 and first half of 2019 show that Ari Mittleman was an employee of *Roberti + White LLC*. At that time, SOCAR USA, a subsidiary of the State Oil Company of Azerbaijan [paid Roberti + White an](#) undisclosed amount for ambiguous lobbying activities. In other words, Ari Mittleman was being paid indirectly by both Mongolia as well as Azerbaijan at the same time, while choosing to use variants of his first name, and the name of his lobbying company in official disclosures, perhaps in an effort to hide ties between Azerbaijan and Mongolia.

The period of 2018 and 2019 also coincides with a number of other developments: in September 2018 Battulga paid a [working visit to Azerbaijan](#), an unusual and first such high-level visit of its kind between two countries, which do not have strong historic ties. One specific point Battulga raised

during his meeting with Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev was the fact that during the 1950s, Azerbaijani experts [operated](#) Mongolia's Zuunbayan refinery. Aliyev agreed that those historic ties could be the basis for future cooperation in the oil sector. At the time Mongolia had already secured a [\\$1 billion EXIM bank loan](#) from India to build a new refinery at Zuunbayan.

Beginning in 2018 Mongolia also began to [markedly miss](#) UN votes related to Israel, such as the General Assembly resolution on [Protection of the Palestinian civilian population](#), the UN Human Rights Council [decision to investigate violations](#) at a Gaza strip protest, and a General Assembly resolution asking [countries not to establish diplomatic](#) missions in Jerusalem and condemning Trump administration's decision to do so.

Battulga's chief of staff attended the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) conference in 2018, and in 2019 Battulga himself would visit [AIPAC's premises during his visit to the US](#). In 2019 [Israel gifted](#) Mongolia's Special Forces with TAVOR rifles and personal equipment. Despite the Israeli foreign ministry's denial that Mongolia's warming ties with the country are not part of a wider effort to draw closer to the United States, there is a pattern to Mongolia's coordinated efforts in the direction of the US, the pro-Israel lobby in Washington, DC, Israel and Azerbaijan. These new overtures to Israel and AIPAC all occurred while Mongolia and Azerbaijan employed the same American-Jewish lobbyist [whose wife](#) works as a [Mid-Atlantic regional](#) director for AIPAC.

Now it is clear that during 2018-2019, Mongolia was providing geopolitical services to Israel, quite possibly in an effort to win more allies in Washington, DC. Mongolian politicians sometimes engage in anti-Semitic conspiracy theories and fearmongering, but that hardly would prevent them from pursuing a pro-Israel strategy in their foreign policy if they saw some benefit from it. This is particularly so during the

Trump administration, which was unusually pro-Israel even by American standards. Israel in many other cases has lent support to other countries' lobbying goals in Washington in exchange for support at the UN, so it would not be unprecedented for Israel to accept Mongolia's overtures and give something in exchange. Perhaps Ulaanbaatar in the latter half of the Trump presidency began to look to Israel because it realized that its usual allies in DC, the Tibetan lobby, were not going to get them to their goal. Hence, the Mongolia Tomorrow Coalition likely tried to build wider bi-partisan support for its trade deal through pro-Israel interests.

In this trilateral relationship between Mongolia, Azerbaijan and pro-Israel interests, we can only suppose what Mongolia was giving and getting from Azerbaijan. At the same time, we are still in the dark about the American sources of donations for the Mongolia Tomorrow Coalition. Thus, it is feasible to imagine that Azerbaijan was footing Mongolia's lobbying fees, while Ulaanbaatar was trying to give a piece of the Zuunbayan oil refinery's deal to Baku in return. What we do know for a fact is that by 2020, Azerbaijan-Mongolia relations were so strong that Mongolia's Ambassador congratulated Azerbaijan on the "[liberation of its lands](#)" after the Second Karabakh War. For a country that usually stays away from geopolitical tensions, this was extremely unusual.

It is precisely in this environment that the Saeid Mollaei's defection from Iran occurred. Mollaei's friendship with Sagi Muki presented great public relations for Azerbaijan. The on-and-off-the-tatami friendship between a Shi'a-Muslim and Israeli would fit perfectly well into Azerbaijan's public relations campaign of instrumentalizing its own Mountain Jewish population as a place of harmony and coexistence between faiths. In a similar vein, the fact that Saeid Mollaei's family hails from the Azeri-speaking Khoy region of Iran would make Azerbaijan a natural destination for him. But somehow it seems in 2019 Azerbaijan was not ready to make such an offer, and someone else had to take up the task. That is

where Mongolia came in, evidently in exchange for a favor to be paid by Azerbaijan.

In the space of three months in late 2019, Saeid Mollaei was first a refugee in Germany, naturalized in Mongolia and then, having been approved by the IJF, ready to take on his opponents on the tatami. In 2021 he traveled to the Tel Aviv Grand Slam, and his meetings with Sagi Muki generated Azerbaijan and others' desired inspirational content, with some Israeli press [even falsely claiming](#) that [he dedicated](#) his Olympic silver medal to Israelis, all the while his Mongolian citizenship remained a seldom mentioned fact. As mentioned previously, Mollaei rarely trained in Mongolia, and when in 2022 he decided to take Azerbaijani citizenship, it felt like a long-preordained matter.

So why did Azerbaijan forego an opportunity to naturalize Mollaei in 2019? Perhaps the answer can be found in the same FARA Reports, in which we see that in the second half of 2019 and throughout 2020, Azerbaijan Railways hired a [lobbyist to advise](#) them about US sanctions on Iran and their impact on railway transit through Iran. Evidently, Azerbaijan was seeking to manage the risks of the newly opened Astara-Astara line, the Iranian section of which was leased to Azerbaijan for 25 years. Baku and Tehran were looking to build on the momentum of that least and construct an [Astara-Rasht](#) railway in order to complete the International North-South Transport Corridor. Therefore, a scandal involving a fleeing wrestler was an unnecessary irritant for Azerbaijani-Iranian relations at the time. A Mongolian passport for Mollaei would be a nice vehicle to park him for a few years until his change in citizenship would no longer matter.

Connecting all the dots in this story, it is not hard to imagine that Ari Mittleman's work for *Roberti + White* for undisclosed services involved proxy lobbying in the interest of Mongolia, or that Azerbaijan, with its deep pockets, could spare some cash for the Mongolia Tomorrow Coalition through

its US [proxies](#), and that Mongolia's original plan was to continue its lobbying in DC with an intention to return the favor to Azerbaijan by giving it a piece of a [\\$1,35 billion refinery](#). Looking back, Mongolia got an Olympic medal, Israeli guns for free and by 2022 went back to its [usual stance](#) on the Israeli-Palestinian issue at the UN but without a trade deal with US. Azerbaijan finally got its wrestler, and DC lobbyists kept their jobs. Not all the players in this story, particularly Azerbaijan, got everything they wanted. Azerbaijan did not get a piece of the refinery because investment opportunities were given first to India, the provider of the export-import loan, which chose its own companies as the contractors. Similarly, the Astaras-Rasht railway project still remains in the discussion phase. In retrospect, there is no single moral to this story other than that this is how our interconnected world works and that oftentimes the protagonists of such complex relations are unlikely partners behind the curtains.