

# The Israel Factor Throws a Wrench in Baku-Ankara Relations

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In recent months we have seen several misunderstandings between Ankara and Baku, and, importantly, the Azerbaijani side has felt no need to hide its dissatisfaction. In the [BRI article](#) on the subject published in August, we pointed out that the main issue causing frustration for Azerbaijan is Türkiye's continued rapprochement with Armenia without any preconditions. This contradicts Azerbaijan's effort to force Armenia to amend its constitution before coming to a peace agreement. Ankara's failure to support this condition reduces the impact of Azerbaijan's pressure on Armenia. At the same time, the Israel-Palestine issue has recently further threatened Azerbaijan-Türkiye ties.

Israeli President Isaak Herzog failed to attend the 29th session of the Conference of the Parties of the UNFCCC (COP 29) in Baku. A spokesman for Herzog's office [stated](#) on November 16 that Herzog decided to cancel his trip to the conference for security reasons, yet this explanation has not been confirmed by Azerbaijan. The next day, *Caliber.az*, which is connected to Azerbaijani official circles, [learned](#) from a high-ranking source in Azerbaijan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs that Türkiye had imposed a ban on the use of its airspace for the Israeli president's aircraft, and that several days of intensive negotiations through diplomatic channels (between Baku and Ankara) to solve the problem yielded no results. The article also emphasizes that security is ensured at the highest level in Azerbaijan, which has hosted numerous major regional and international events. A [post](#) on *Qafqazinfo*, another online resource close to

Azerbaijani governmental circles, noted that Baku received the news of Türkiye barring Herzog's flight to COP29 with surprise and regret. The post stated: "What raises questions is the increased frequency of secret meetings between Turkish and Armenian officials, as well as reports that the President of Israel was barred from participating in COP29, which Azerbaijan has organized at a high level."

These articles, which were prepared under the Azerbaijani presidential administration's supervision, show that Baku was deeply displeased with Türkiye's obstruction of a high-ranking guest's participation in an international event. Moreover, Azerbaijan most likely has information about the intensive secret meetings between Türkiye and Armenia, and officials in Baku are concerned about it.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip [Erdoğan addressed](#) Herzog's visit to Baku while in Brazil where he attended the G20 Summit: "We did not allow the Israeli president to use our airspace to attend the COP summit. We suggested alternative routes and other options. But whether he was able to go or not, I honestly don't know. On certain matters, as Türkiye, we are compelled to take a stand, and we will continue to do so."

The central question of this paper is what does Erdoğan mean by "take a stand"? Does he refer here only to relations with Israel, or does he also want to indicate a new, less friendly stance with Azerbaijan? It is hard to find a definitive answer, but we here address the possibilities.

The Turkish airspace ban came amid sharp criticism of the Erdoğan government's continued trade with Israel. The country's conservative political groups and non-governmental sector's loud criticism of trade with Israel has been a consistent headache for President Erdoğan. In the run-up to the 31 March 2024 municipal elections, the Islamist New Welfare Party (YRP) made the government's continuation of economic and trade relations with Israel one of its principal

critiques of Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP). The AKP finished second in these elections for the first time since its founding, while the YRP achieved its highest result ever, receiving over 6% of the vote. A week after the elections, the government [announced](#) restrictions on exports to Israel. However, the record [increase](#) in Turkish exports to Palestine following the trade ban raises reasonable doubts about the government's implementation of the trade ban: It may simply be labeling exports to Israel as exports to Palestine in its reports

Moreover, the Turkish government has also been harshly criticized for allowing the flow of crude oil to Israel from Ceyhan through the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline. Turkish citizens widely believe "we fuel Israeli jets and tanks bombarding Palestinians," thus putting the government in a difficult position. Since May, civil society activists have been protesting across Türkiye. Some of the most recent and ongoing demonstrations and rallies are: A [rally](#) staged by non-governmental organizations simultaneously across the country, demanding to "Cut off the oil flowing to Israel via the BTC pipeline!"; a [demonstration](#) by the group called "A Thousand Youth for Palestine," which stormed the Istanbul office of Azerbaijan's state energy company SOCAR and covered the building in red paint to symbolize blood; and a [rally](#) for Palestine staged by demonstrators who held a banner reading "Shut off the valves [of oil], do not be complicit in genocide!" in front of SOCAR's refinery in the port of Aliğa near Izmir, among others. *One Thousand Youth for Palestine*, represented by Islamist and leftist young people, also continued its protests after the launch of the COP29. A group of young activists [rallied](#) in Istanbul on 13 November, with slogans like "Azerbaijan sells oil to Israel and Türkiye transports it. End your betrayal of Palestine!" In the past few days, the issue was also [raised](#) by the opposition in the Turkish parliament and sparked a fierce debate. The growing problem forced the government to issue a [statement](#). The

Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources called the accusations of selling oil to Israel unfounded.

Obviously, Azerbaijani authorities are concerned about this sentiment in Turkish society and are trying to influence local public opinion through *Haber Global*, a SOCAR-sponsored TV channel. This channel and others have alleged that *One Thousand Youth for Palestine* is an [Iran-aligned terrorist organization](#). SOCAR Türkiye said in a written [statement](#): “Allegations that SOCAR is currently selling crude oil to Israel are baseless. The crude oil produced is sold through trading companies or intermediaries. Supply companies cannot control or intervene in which countries the crude oil is transported to or for what purposes it is used.”. This claim is, of course, untrue because the Azerbaijani oil exported to Israel is mentioned in official reports as Azerbaijan’s oil exported to Israel. Export [data](#) as of January 2024 from Azerbaijan’s State Customs Committee (SSC), for example, showed that Israel topped the list of destinations for Azerbaijan’s oil.

In short, it is clear that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has become a factor affecting the relations between Türkiye and Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan’s recent move to reach out to the Turkish opposition at the highest level is of note here. President Ilham Aliyev and Özgür Özel, the Chairman of Türkiye’s main opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP), held a telephone call on 8 November, the day that is solemnly celebrated in Azerbaijan as Victory Day. The CHP said in a [statement](#) that in the call Özel expressed his wish to visit President Aliyev in Baku together with former CHP Chairman Hikmet Çetin, one of Türkiye’s most experienced elder statesmen, and President Aliyev said that he would be pleased to host them. Ekrem İmamoğlu, the Mayor of Istanbul, arrived in Azerbaijan on 13 November to attend the COP29 summit and met with the Baku City Executive Authority Head Eldar Azizov. İmamoğlu is considered

the chief alternative to Erdoğan in Türkiye and could become the CHP's candidate in the next presidential election.

The CHP is a *within-the-system* party that won the last municipal elections in Türkiye and has the second-largest faction in Türkiye's Grand National Assembly. It is not uncommon for other countries to establish contacts and collaborate with opposition parties at an official level. However, Azerbaijan has rarely engaged in such cooperation with other states' opposition forces. Aliyev's only previous [meeting](#) with a CHP leader took place during his first formal visit as president to Türkiye in 2004. In the last twenty years, Azerbaijan has had contact with Turkish opposition parliamentarians, including CHP deputies, both in a bilateral format and within the framework of international organizations, but has not developed relationships across institutional boundaries. Therefore, the call between Aliyev and Özel is important, especially during a period when there have been misunderstandings in Azerbaijani-Turkish relations.