

## Tensions Escalate Between Iran and Azerbaijan Due in Large Part to the Latter's Close Military Ties with Israel

Over this past week, tensions between Iran and neighboring Azerbaijan escalated, with the most significant strain on relations stemming from Azerbaijan's close military ties with Israel. The presence of Israeli military bases in Azerbaijan and weapons support to the Caucasus nation, including during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, have heightened hostilities between Iran and Azerbaijan. Israel has supplied Azerbaijan with military technology and armed drones, attempting to cultivate strong ties with the country which is strategically situated along Iran's northern border. Iran views these actions as a provocation and a national security threat, and conducted massive military exercises near its shared border with Azerbaijan. Relations between the two countries were also complicated recently after Azerbaijan imposed a "road tax" on Iranian trucks passing through the Karabakh region and detained multiple drivers. Additionally, in response to the Iranian army drills, Azerbaijan and Turkey announced plans to hold joint military exercises in Azerbaijan, raising concerns among security experts that the various respective buildups may further fuel tensions in the region.

Israel's noteworthy and expanding military ties with Azerbaijan are playing a major role in the escalation of tensions between Iran and Azerbaijan. Within Azerbaijan itself, Israeli and Iranian hostilities seem to be evident in a proxy location. The existence of Israeli military bases there is a clear provocation and a signaling of its intent to pose a nearby geographic and strategic threat to the Iranian regime. Israel claims that its military presence is a protective mechanism, but most impartial analysts view it instead as an aggressive and antagonistic tactic, and as such Iran deems it as an effort to intimidate. With its influence, Israel is trying to shift the geopolitical balance in the region and present Azerbaijan as a hostile state in the eyes of Iran. The close military ties between Israel and Azerbaijan are thus the root cause of the increased Iranian-Azeri hostilities which have manifested over the preceding week.

These palpable military ties have been particularly at the forefront since the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, when Azerbaijan used and relied heavily on Israeli weaponry in its strikes against Armenian forces in the region. In total, around 60% of Azerbaijan's arms procurement comes from Israel, as the two countries cooperate closely on security and energy. Azerbaijan is a major purchaser of Israeli weaponry and military technology, while Israel buys approximately 40% of its oil from the South Caucasus nation. Furthermore, Azerbaijan's advantageous geopolitical positioning in the region provides Israel with a key collaborator and locale for the placement of some of its military bases, and therefore many observers point out that it is no surprise Israel has prioritized the strengthening of its relations with Azerbaijan.

It appears as though the flexing of military muscles by both sides – Iran on one end and Azerbaijan and its allies on the other – may continue in the upcoming days and weeks. One can only hope that the military drills and exercises carried out do not devolve into a potential armed and direct confrontation between any of the various actors involved, especially because of the multifaceted nature of the situation.