

Gunning for Conflict: Israel-Azerbaijan Collaboration Against Iran

In a bid to shift the region's balance of power, Israel has for years illicitly transported arms to Azerbaijan, impacting the latter's conflict with Armenia and creating a crisis with bordering Iran.

By [Anis Raiss](#)

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According to a 6 March investigation by [Haaretz](#), Israeli weapons were being transported to the Azerbaijani military during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, which left thousands of civilians dead, wounded, and displaced.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the conflict, rooted in the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region between Azerbaijan and Armenia, transformed into an open and bloody war, during which both sides faced sanctions and severe export restrictions from the US and Europe.

The revelation of Israeli arms exports to Azerbaijan has sparked controversy and criticism from [Humans Rights Watch](#) (HRW) because of the Azerbaijani military's alleged human rights abuses, which include the use of banned cluster munitions and the targeting of civilian areas.

These revelations have also escalated tensions between Israel and Armenia. In the wake of the crisis, Yerevan recalled its ambassador from Tel Aviv in 2020, and demanded that Israel cease all arms exports to Azerbaijan and adopt a neutral position in the conflict.

Flying in Israeli arms to Azerbaijan

According to the newly obtained documents, Azerbaijani cargo airline Silk Way Airlines has been landing at Israel's Ovda airbase to transport explosives for around a decade. Israeli aviation law prohibits the routine transport of explosives from its more densely populated Ben-Gurion Airport, so in 2016, Silk Way was granted an exemption to continue landing at Ovda - with some of these flights reportedly using the official call sign of Azerbaijan's defense ministry.

The revelation has also raised domestic concerns about potential dangers posed by the airline's cargo, prompting Israeli authorities to launch an investigation into the airline's regulatory compliance to safeguard the general public.

This comes after a report by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project ([OCCRP](#)) disclosed that Silk Way allegedly made 350 secret flights between 2014 and 2017, illegally transporting hundreds of tons of weapons from Bulgaria to ISIS, Syria, and other regional states. The disclosure came to light after a reporter filed a Freedom of Information Act request with the US government in 2016.

The report also noted that Silk Way, which is owned by a company with past ties to Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and his family, has gained several lucrative contracts from the US military. Interestingly, the airline received \$419.5 million in loans from the US Export-Import Bank to expand its fleet, purchasing three 747-8 cargo planes from Boeing to continue its operations, which have been described as "sinister."

The Ex-Im Bank is a federal agency with the primary policy of supporting the acquisition of US-made products such as Boeing aircraft. However, the Azerbaijani airline has strongly denied the allegations that it operated hundreds of secret flights transporting weapons and has claimed that the report was the "result of an organized campaign of misinformation penned by geopolitically motivated authors."

Despite the allegations, Silk Way has contractual relationships with several of the world's biggest institutions, among them, the US military, Boeing and Boeing Global Services, the Canadian Department of National Defense, the German Armed Forces, the French Army, and the United Nations.

The Israel-Azerbaijan alliance

Tel Aviv and Baku have developed a [pragmatic and discreet relationship](#), with Azerbaijan serving as a crucial market worth billions of dollars for Israel's defense industry. Since 2005, and although under an arms embargo, *Haaretz* reports that almost 70 percent of Azerbaijan's weapons arsenal has been supplied by Israel, while Israeli tech firms have supplied Baku with advanced spy technology, including the controversial Pegasus spyware from the notorious Israeli cyber arms [NSO Group](#).

For its part, Azerbaijan supplies Israel with oil, and crucially, [access to Iran's borders](#). In 2011, the alliance between the two countries further strengthened with a \$1.6 billion deal that included a battery of Barak missiles, Searcher and Heron drones from Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI), and a partnership between Aeronautics Defence Systems and the local arms industry in Azerbaijan.

Cooperation between Israel and Azerbaijan is not restricted to the military sector but extends further to [economic ventures](#). The Baku government has recently promoted tenders for the reconstruction of "liberated areas" in Karabakh and is inviting foreign entrepreneurs to invest in green energy zones. Israeli companies have already taken part in these projects, with the investment platform OurCrowd being one of them.

OurCrowd signed a memorandum of understanding with the Public Investment Company of Azerbaijan (AIC) for strategic cooperation in investments. The AIC is set to invest in 10-15 start-ups from the OurCrowd portfolio that can help Azerbaijan's economy, focusing on

areas such as energy, health, agritech, food-tech, and education.

Mossad's presence in Azerbaijan

Recent news reports claim that Baku has allowed Israel's intelligence agency, the Mossad, to set up a forward operating branch, allowing it to install listening and tracking devices in Azerbaijan to monitor Iran's activities in exchange for weapons from Israel. In addition, Baku has reportedly prepared an airfield to assist Israel in the event it decides to attack Iranian nuclear sites.

Israel's access to airfields in Azerbaijan would be a game-changer in its ability to strike Iran's nuclear facilities, as it would allow Israeli fighter-bombers to continue flying north and land in Azerbaijan instead of relying on air refueling.

Israeli refueling exercises have previously been [criticized](#) by a senior US military intelligence officer who once described these as "pretty minimal" and "not very good at it." In 2010, during a joint exercise with Romania, the US expressed discomfort with bombing exercises against Iran from a NATO-member state, and the Israelis had to eventually reduce their military activities there. While the use of Azeri airfields does not guarantee an Israeli attack on Iran, it certainly increases the feasibility of such aggression.

During an interview with [The Times](#) in 2012, Mossad agent "Shimon" revealed that Azerbaijan is a country where Mossad agents operate covertly and is regarded as "ground zero for intelligence work."

According to Shimon, the Mossad's presence in the [South Caucasus](#) republic is significant, yet unobtrusive, with operations in recent years increasing their proximity to Iran. The border region between Azerbaijan and Iran, situated just a few hours from the capital city of Baku, is allegedly a vital area for Israeli operations conducted within Iran.

Undermining Iran's security

It has been reported that the Mossad [transferred confidential documents](#) pertaining to Iran's nuclear program in 2018 via Azerbaijan. Iranian authorities arrested ten individuals with suspected ties to the spy agency, who stood accused of targeting Iranian intelligence personnel in the West Azerbaijan province.

The spy network was accused of attempting to extract information from Iranian intelligence personnel through violent means such as kidnapping, threats, and beatings. They were also charged with setting fire to homes and cars associated with Iran's security services and attempting to physically assassinate intelligence personnel. The group was said to have operated under the guidance of Mossad officers in West Azerbaijan, Tehran, and Hormozgan.

After 30 years of diplomatic relations between the two states, on 29 March, Azerbaijan inaugurated the opening of its embassy in Tel Aviv.

During the ceremonies, which were attended in person by Azerbaijan's Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov, Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen dropped a bombshell, saying: "Bayramov and I agreed to form a united front against Iran."

The Iranian response was swift, and ended up being aired on Twitter by Foreign Ministry

Spokesman Nasser Kanaani, where he [revealed](#) that Baku had not only refused to explain Cohen's incendiary claim to officials in Tehran, but had even lobbed "new accusations against Iran":



In a follow up [tweet](#), Kanaani warned that Tel Aviv's aim is to sow discord among Muslims, and advised "Muslim brothers and sisters in [Shia majority] Azerbaijan to be aware of the real intentions of the Zionist enemy."

Both the Mossad and Silk Way Airlines have proven to be vital components in the strategic intel and military partnership between Israel and Azerbaijan against Iran, and as tensions increase, that collaboration is likely to further expand. As long as Tel Aviv is prepared to bypass embargo and sanctions to provide Baku with its military needs, the latter will grow ever more dependent on the former.

What remains to be seen is how far Baku is prepared to antagonize its southern neighbor. Israel's use of Azerbaijani territory as a launching pad for aggressions against Iran will never be tolerated, as [Erbil](#) and [Baku](#) have learned in recent years.

But will Azerbaijan be able to control and contain Tel Aviv's operations inside its borders when push comes to shove? The stability and security of the region may depend on this, especially as the geopolitical landscape of West Asia continues to rapidly evolve.

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