

Israeli Weapons Flow to Azerbaijan

Turkey's Islamists, Nationalists Remain Silent

By [Pinar Tremblay](#)

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In early April, as renewed fighting between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the disputed [Nagorno-Karabakh](#) region made headlines in Turkey, there was little talk of the crucial role of [Israeli weapons](#) in the clashes. Only the daily [Hurriyet reported](#) on Azerbaijan's use of the Israeli [Harop armed drone](#), which generated [Armenian protests](#).

Justice and Development Party (AKP) spokesperson [Omer Celik](#) summarized why the issue should be important to the press: "Azerbaijan's battle is our battle; their martyrs are our martyrs." Indeed, Azerbaijan consistently scores as Turkey's [closest friend](#) in Turkish public opinion polls, while Israel maintains its status as a serious threat in the same polls.

Intriguingly, Israel is Azerbaijan's main arms supplier, a situation that poses a puzzle: Why have Turks remained silent as Azerbaijan, their closest friend, and Israel, their greatest rival — if not necessarily enemy — have grown closer? The silence of two sections of Turkish society is particularly noteworthy: One is Turkish ultra-nationalists, whose commitment to Azerbaijan is near-absolute; the other is Islamists, who miss no opportunity to bash Israel. Why are these two groups, whose protests are rarely if ever curtailed by the police in Turkey, ignoring this development?

The Israeli-Azeri cooperation has expanded as Israeli-Turkish relations have soured since the 2010 [Mavi Marmara](#) incident. Richard Giragosian, director of the Regional Studies Center (RSC), an independent think tank in Yerevan, Armenia, told AI-Monitor, "Israel has replaced Turkey as an essential military patron of Azerbaijan, as seen in the 2012 deal involving the Azerbaijani procurement of drones and anti-aircraft missile defense systems from the state-run Israel Aerospace Industries for \$1.6 billion." Giragosian explained that the bilateral relations are not limited to the weapons trade. The countries' interests converge in three main areas — "security and military, including intelligence cooperation; energy and trade; and geopolitical strategy," he said.

So why are Turkish Islamists and ultra-nationalists remaining silent as their rival Israel expands its presence in Azerbaijan? There are at least two intertwined explanations for this rational ignorance: the media's silence and political pragmatism.

There is an undeclared media gag order in Turkey on publishing, and not just on anti-AKP stories considered unpleasant for the government. The Israeli-Azerbaijani relationship is diligently ignored in mainstream media. Hence, several leading figures of grass-roots Islamist and nationalist movements told AI-Monitor they are not aware of the extent of the strategic friendship between Turkey's best friend and its most outspoken rival in the region. It was particularly noteworthy that none of the ultra-nationalists and only one of the Islamists was willing to go on the record with their views on the subject.

A middle-aged, self-described bozkurt (a nickname for a member of the Gray Wolves, the Turkish ultra-nationalist group) who worked in organizing youth told Al-Monitor, “Our youth are happy to see Azerbaijan triumph. We all wish it was mostly Turkish-made weapons being used, but we are not there yet. In the meantime, we cannot fuss about the identity of the manufacturer.” [Turkey sells arms](#) to Azerbaijan as well.

When reminded of the increasing presence of Israeli intelligence in Azerbaijan, as well as in the oil and gas trade, realpolitik came to the fore. Approaching the question in a frivolous manner, the Gray Wolf said, “Our [Turkish] relations are much better with Israel now, so are the Azerbaijanis’. Who is going to call the kettle black? Times have changed.”

Times have changed indeed, as one of the last critical pieces of news on the topic from the Turkish government dates back to a 2011 [story on Hurriyet](#). Back then, Turkey had asked Azerbaijan to scale back its relationship with Israel. So the age-old saying “If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em” has become the tacit motto of the Turkish government in the Israeli-Azeri strategic friendship. Behind closed doors, the Turkish-Israeli-Azeri bloc seems to be working fine on almost all fronts. For the ultra-nationalists, a potential Azeri victory over Armenia overrides their dislike of Israel.

Turkish Islamist groups are more conflicted about the issue. Most of these groups cherish any negative news about Israel. Though Israel bashing in Turkey has softened noticeably in the past year, one can still spot at least a couple of anti-Israeli opinion pieces daily with a good [dose of anti-Semitism](#) in the conservative media outlets. So it is difficult to imagine these groups are warming up to the idea of being friends with Israel.

Indeed, a comparison of [Kadir Has University](#)’s Foreign Policy Perceptions research findings of 2015 and 2016, released May 18, reveals a significant indication of how the Turkish public justifies its silence and acceptance of Israeli arms flooding Azeri markets. The percentage of those Turks surveyed who view [Azerbaijan as a friend](#) has jumped from 37.2% in 2015 to 59.3% in 2016. There has been a significant decrease in the percentage of those who see Israel as a threat: from 42.6% in 2015 to 26% in 2016.

Turkey’s increased anti-US and anti-Russian reporting this year has led to a significant shift in Turkish perceptions of the United States and Russia. Survey respondents consider them the top two major threats, at 44.1% and 34.9%, respectively. Foreign policy perceptions are known to be highly susceptible to fluctuations in news reporting, as these Turkish findings show. So a good portion of Turks have accepted Israel’s apology for the Mavi Marmara flotilla and replaced Israel on the threat perception scale with the United States and Russia. Al-Monitor contacted Osman Atalay of the [Humanitarian Relief Fund](#) in Turkey, which is known for its rallies against Israel, but he declined comment.

Some Islamists, however, are willing to speak up. One group is the independent Salafi ultra-conservative Islamic sect, which does not associate with the established religious orders. Twelve individuals who self-identified as Salafists told Al-Monitor it is not worth protesting against Israel or Azerbaijan because both are infidels. One shopkeeper from Adiyaman said, “What do you expect from the Shia? They are the infidels ... of course they will collaborate with the Jews.” This was surprising to hear because most critics of the Azeri government brand the country as a supporter of the Sunni [Islamic State](#). Yet again, the same confusing scenario is true for almost every other Muslim country.

Kadir Akaras, chairman of [Ehli Beyt Scholars Association](#), which represents Turkish

Shiites, was blunt in his criticism of Israel during a [TV program](#) in April. He went on the record asking, “We approach [the disputed] Karabakh as we approach Palestine and view Armenia as we view Israel. Why wouldn’t the Saudi-led coalition of Muslim countries come to the assistance of Azerbaijan?”

One of the openly outspoken groups against Turkish-Israeli rapprochement has been the Kurdish Islamist Party Hudapar. [Hudapar’s spokesperson Sait Sahin](#) was straightforward in his position, saying, “Turkey’s ‘zero problems with neighbors’ policy collapsed completely. Turkey strained its relations with Russia and since then has been sending positive messages toward Israel; hence, we cannot expect Turkey to protest Azerbaijan’s friendship with Israel,” he told Al-Monitor.

Overall, as Azeri-Israeli strategic cooperation deepens, we are once more reminded that radical groups in Turkish society are still taking their cues from the government and are in sync with the state. Hence, it would be too soon to interpret the results of Kadir Has University’s research as a significant change in anti-Israel sentiment in Turkey. A more sober analysis would be that even the hatred for Israel can be controlled if it is in the interest of these groups.

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Articles by: [Pinar Tremblay](#)

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