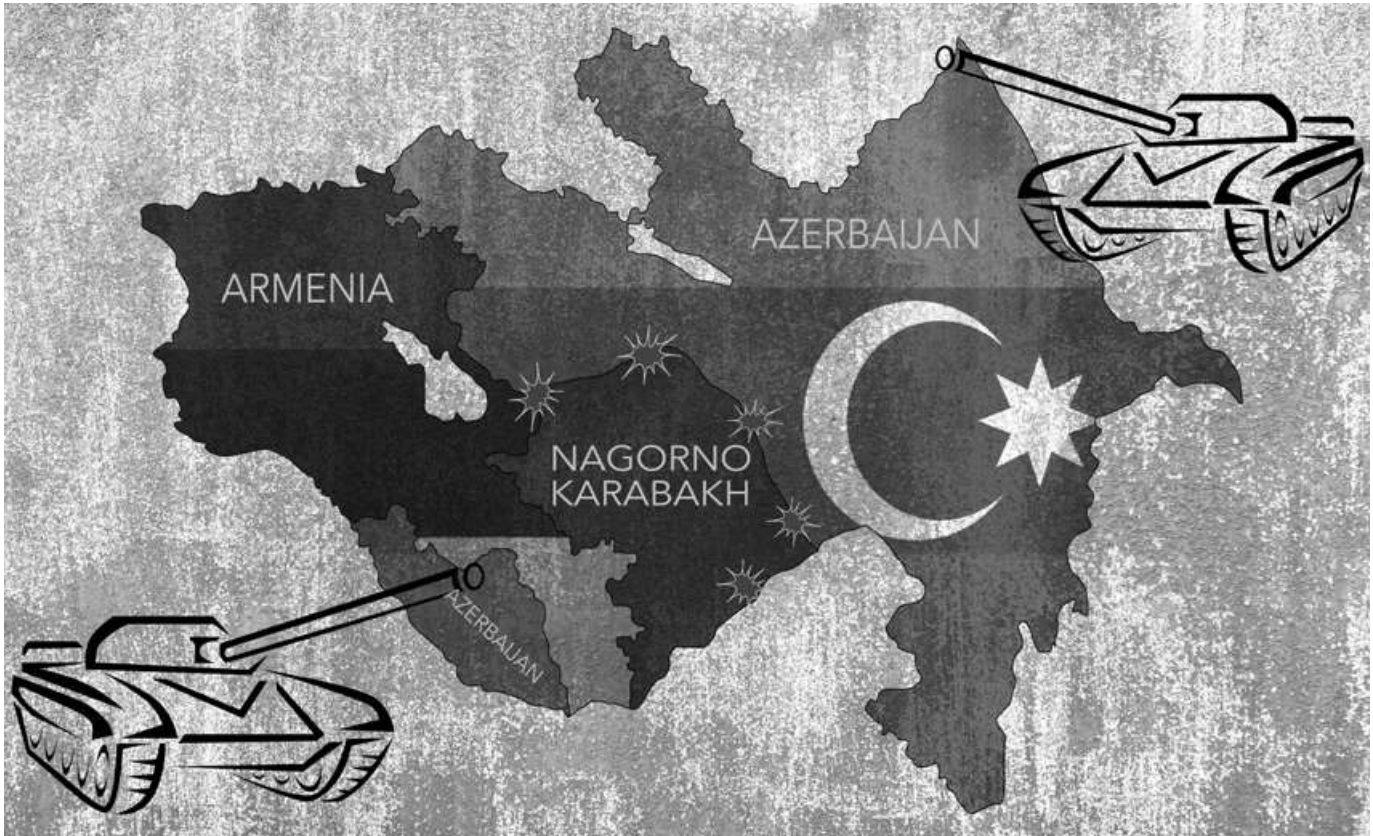


Surprising Partners and Enemies the South Caucasus

BY ALAN WHITEHORN



Map of Armenia and Azerbaijan, in the middle of the war region. | © AndreaNicolini, Adobe stock

Why does Israel sell arms to Azerbaijan?

Armenia and the South Caucasus were historically part of the former Soviet Union and are often considered, in geopolitical terms, to be in the so-called Moscow-influenced, 'Russia's near abroad'.

It may be useful, however, to recognize the significant connections of the South Caucasus to the Middle East. In fact, Armenia is relatively close geographically (under 1,000 km) to each of the capital cities of Tehran (Iran), Baghdad (Iraq) and Ankara (Turkey) and not

much farther from Israel and Lebanon (under 1,300 km).

In terms of international affairs and recent conflict, Turkey has been a crucial military ally of Azerbaijan during the latter's South Caucasus wars with Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh (Artsakh) in 2020 and 2023.

A lesser-known fact is that over the previous decade, Israel has been a major weapons supplier to Azerbaijan, particularly advanced drones that proved critical for Baku's swift and decisive victory in the 2020 Armenia-Azerbaijan war, and its 2023 recapture of Nagorno Karabakh, which displaced over 100,000 civilians, virtually all of the local Armenian population.

Historically, Iran has been greatly concerned with the Ottoman Empire's (Turkey's) rival ambitions in the South Caucasus, the Middle East and beyond. Azerbaijan's recent war victories in the South Caucasus, along with its border

We are witnessing an ongoing tragic saga of conflict

incursions upon Armenian territory, have fostered further apprehensions in Tehran about the growing Baku-Ankara military-political axis.



An Azerbaijani girl demonstrating in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. | © Umut Çolak, Wikimedia

This is particularly so, given that historically Azerbaijan has encouraged ethnic Azeri separatists in Iran -- which pose potential threats to the territorial integrity of Iran itself.

SURPRISING PARTNERSHIP

In recent years, there has been increased speculation about Israeli military cooperation with Azerbaijan, not only as it relates to deliveries of high-tech drones to Baku on the eve of war, but also possible Israeli military and intelligence use of Azerbaijani routes for covert and overt actions against Iran.

There is a likelihood that the connection may intensify along with the expansion of war in the Middle East. But although Israel's partnership with Muslim Turkey rather than Orthodox Christian Armenia may at first appear counterintuitive, Israel's grave concerns about the Iranian government's continuing threat influenced Tel Aviv's willingness to sell arms to the Azerbaijani dictatorship. And as well as a source of lucrative arms sales, Azerbaijan is also a crucial supplier of oil to Israel.

These geopolitical facts were both understood and resented in Yerevan and adversely affected Israeli-Armenian relations. Tensions over an Australian-Israeli developer's controversial land acquisition efforts to obtain a 98-year lease to a

*Iranian government's
continuing threat influenced
Tel Aviv's willingness*

significant portion of the Armenian Church Quarter in Jerusalem, combined with subsequent violent acts and threats by a group of Jewish militant settlers against local Armenian community members in Jerusalem, have further complicated relations between the Israeli and Armenian governments.

Ongoing and spiralling conflicts in both the South Caucasus and the Middle East have been key features of recent history. Efforts at peace negotiations and attempts at comprehensive treaties have often been marked by profound disagreements, frustrating deadlocks, significant setbacks and even outright failures. Sadly, it is not uncommon for disputes and conflicts to spill over from one region to another, particularly in an age of global major power rivalries.

Thus, while viewing Armenia and the South Caucasus from the re-emerging Cold War perspective of instability, "frozen conflicts" and recurring wars in the

former Soviet sphere, we can also look at the South Caucasus as a part of the larger and complex Middle East region, intertwined not only by geography but political expediency.

We are witnessing an ongoing tragic saga of conflict and prolonged human suffering. For much of the extended region and the many peoples involved, there have been too many dead from war, too many displaced civilians, too many long-term refugees and far too many orphans of genocide. My Armenian grandmother was one such orphan in the region in 1915. Our family still lives with that bitter legacy more than a century later.

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Flags of Iran and Israel divided by barb wire. | © xbrchx, Adobe stock