

**Azerbaijan-Israel-Greece:  
A New Geopolitical Compass in the Horizon**

**Raagini Sharma**  
(RIEAS Senior Analyst)

*Copyright @ 2023 Research Institute for European and American Studies ([www.rieas.gr](http://www.rieas.gr))*

*Publication date: 4 March 2023*

*Note: The article reflects the opinion of the author and not necessarily the views of the Research Institute for European and American Studies (RIEAS).*

### **Introduction**

**Geo-politics** is primarily the international relations of a particular state as impacted by its geographical location and the influence of regional and global factors. In the case of the East Mediterranean and Caucasus regions, wherein, the focus of the study is on the relations between Azerbaijan, Greece and Israel, the manifestation of the inter-relationships is a complicated one influenced by the historical, cultural, economic and geographical factors.

**The Caucasus region** is still stabilizing itself post-implosion of the erstwhile USSR and is a region of protracted conflicts (Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan and the instability in Russia's North Caucasus) that threaten the peace and stability of the region. The region is heavily militarized and volatile.

**The East Mediterranean region** has its own geo-political dynamics impacted by Turkey and its regional power projection; discovery of hydrocarbons off the coasts of Egypt, Israel and Cyprus and related problems of claims, counter-claims on the resources and exploration, extraction and transmission of oil and natural gas in the Eastern Mediterranean region.

Add to all the issues, the covid calamity and post covid impacts; the ongoing Russo-Ukraine war; the rise of political Islam; climate-related issues and the aspirations and national goals of each nation, and the geo-political situation in East Mediterranean and Caucasus regions becomes extremely intricate and difficult to predict.

## **Greece and Israel: A security strategic relationship**

Greece has been the cradle of civilization and Israel is a piece of land that has been fought over since the dawn of history and is a modern nation that was formed after the UN resolution in 1949. Both nations are steeped in history. Athens and Jerusalem have been the seats of religion, philosophy, culture and art for centuries. Greece has seen the reigns of Alexander the Great, Byzantine empire and Ottoman Empire. The modern Greece emerged after the Greek revolution in 1821. Both the nations are now amongst the strongest nations in the Eastern Mediterranean. The history of bilateral relations between the two, however, has been chequered.

Estranged from each other, Greece and Israel did not share the positive vibes since the inception of Israel as a country. First few decades after the Israel was born witnessed indifferent and sour relationship between the two, if not outrightly hostile. But the turn in the relationship was seen at the beginning of the 21st century. The relations between the two started improving and at present there are mutual cooperation in the fields of economic, trade, tourism, investments, agriculture, defense, energy, environment, shipping and education. The strengthening of ties is due to the changing geopolitical dynamics in the East Mediterranean region as also the declining relationship between Turkey and Israel.

For the last decade, there have been several visits by dignitaries to one another nation involving political consultations and exploring the areas where the two countries can be mutually benefitted. The positive trajectory of relationships between the two nations is a positive sign and it is about a decade plus when the relationship has started improving. The parameters have been turned since last decade and both the countries are on an upswing trajectory of good relations. Defense deals have been signed between Greece and Israel in recent past showcasing the growing strategic and military cooperation between the two countries. The political and strategic dialogues are on the rise. The cooperation in fields of energy and newer technologies is expanding. The tourism is booming with visitors from both the sides exploring each other nation.

Energy is one vital field in which cooperation between Israel and Greece cannot be talked without including Cyprus. The project, East-Med Natural Gas pipeline dealing with the transfer of natural gas between Israel, Greece and Cyprus by laying the pipelines is a major project. However, it faces technical and economic challenges apart from the opposing views of some European nations which view it as a competition in making.

Greece can play a pivotal role for Israel to forge its relations with EU. In the backdrop of protracted war between Russia and Ukraine, the European countries crave for lesser dependence for energy resources from Russia. Israel may play a role of natural gas provider and for its transfer to EU nations. Similarly, Greece holds the crucial key to foster and enhance cooperation amongst EU and Israel in other fields too.

The security matrix in the East Mediterranean and adjoining Asian countries in the backdrop of ongoing Russo-Ukraine War is a complex one with several balancing and counter-balancing factors at play. Greece has to ensure its security against non-conventional and conventional threats in the region. It can learn vital lessons in cybersecurity, hybrid warfare, space programs and conventional warfare from Israel. Several defense deals are being signed between the two nations and in the summer of 2022, [Forbes reported](#) that *Greece had deployed Israeli systems and the Hellenic Republic has also reportedly shown interest in purchase of Israeli SPIKE / NLOS missiles.*

### **Azerbaijan and Israel: An Abraham model in the Caucasus?**

Azerbaijan got independence in 1991 and Israel was one of the first nation to recognize the independent Republic of Azerbaijan and subsequently it opened its embassy in 1993 in Baku. Since then, the ties between the two are getting stronger by the day. Post Russo-Georgia war in 2008, the geo-strategic imperatives made the two countries, Georgia and Azerbaijan lean towards strengthening its defense capabilities/potential including through cooperation with relevant international bodies and developing bilateral military relations. For Israel, Azerbaijan is one of the most important partners in the Islamic world. Azerbaijan as a Shiite Muslim country is the only one having an embassy in Tel-Aviv and has the biggest Jewish minority. The trade between the two countries along with cooperation in security matters, cultural and educational exchanges has been expanding over the decades. Israel has been the major provider of arms to strengthen and modernize the military of Azerbaijan that it needs to counter balance the threats from Armenia, Iran and Russia.

One of the strategic factors keeping and strengthening of the bond is that Azerbaijan wanted to shed its atavism and diplomatic isolation after it gained independence and it found Israel as the valuable partner. Even being located next to Iran, with whom it would not wish to have direct confrontation, it extended its hand of friendship to Israel at the expense of severe displeasure from Iran. The proximity to Russia has also been a deterrent in developing relations with Israel.

Nevertheless, Azerbaijan has taken a conscious decision to develop strategic relations with Israel.

For Israel, it wants a strategic link in the Caucasus region, sandwiched between Black Sea and the Caspian Sea as well as between Russia and Iran, as also the credible friend in the Islamic world. Israel has found a strong ally in Azerbaijan even though it is located next to Iran. Proximity of Iran to Azerbaijan gives Israel an attractive parameter to keep the relationship stable. Another reason for Israel to further the relationship is the significant portion of oil consumed in Israel is imported from Azerbaijan through the **Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline**.

Azerbaijan opened its embassy in Israel last November paving the way to further strengthen the bilateral relations. This is amid the escalating differences with its Southern neighbor, Iran. With opening of Embassy in Tel Aviv, the unofficial channel of communications which were existing between the two nations have paved the way for upfront diplomatic communication. However, there may be tacit understandings between the two nations apart from this display of overt diplomatic relations.

The relations between Israel and Azerbaijan are not likely to have a smooth sailing in future given the facts of Iran's overt disliking of the closeness between two countries; Russia's designs of hegemony; the **North South-Transport Corridor** that runs through Azerbaijan tilts the country to appease Iran and Russia and lastly, the pressure that may come through Islamic countries. Hence, geo-strategic shifts are going to take place with re-molding of relations amongst the nations.

### **Azerbaijan and Greece: Energy Hubs for Stability and Peace**

With embassies of Israel operating in Baku since May 1993 soon after Azerbaijan got its independence, and of Azerbaijan in Athens since April 2004, the diplomatic relations between the two countries date back to three decades plus. Both the nations are members of Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC). These are the common touching grounds apart from the historical and cultural relations between the two.

They have been having chequered history of relationship because of several reasons with primary being the military cooperation between Greece and Armenia and the close relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan. The period of uncertainty of relations between the two is as recent as in 2020 but strategic patience has been shown by the two nations and the relationship

has been improving. There is cooperation in sectors such as economy, energy, industry, transport, agriculture and education. Cultural exchanges form part of such confidence building measures.

Energy is one important sector wherein almost 15% oil that is consumed in Greece is imported from Azerbaijan. Greece has been instrumental in implementation of Southern Gas Corridor through **Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP)** construction. With Inter-connector Greece - Bulgaria started operation in October 2022, that delivers gas from Azerbaijan to Bulgaria through Greece, it is assisting Azerbaijan in transmission of gas. Athens has become one of the most significant energy hubs. The ongoing Russo-Ukraine war has impacted the geo-energy conditions in Europe in particular and the world as such. The energy sector thus is the premium field that brings both the nations together.

### **Geo-political Dynamics Between Athens, Tel Aviv and Baku**

The geopolitical dynamics in any region are the outcome of the regional phenomena and the impact of global events. The Ukraine war has impacted / is impacting the Balkans, Caucasus and the East Mediterranean nations hugely being in proximity to the war zone. The situation remains unpredictable, uncertain and to an extent volatile.

Azerbaijan is a friendly country to Israel in the hostile region. Azerbaijan is very important country to have diplomatic relations with Israel. The relations of Israel with Armenia and Iran are hostile and with Turkey, it is non-friendly/neutral/friendly. Israel would aim to maintain friendly relations in the Caucasus region. It has maintained good relations with Azerbaijan and will like to warm its relations with Turkey. Israeli considers Azerbaijan as a close friend and a regional anchor.

Azerbaijan emerged victorious in the second **Nagorno-Karabakh war in 2020** also due to strong military cooperation and the arms procured from Israel. International media prefers to make reference to Bayraktar drones of Turkey but the Kamikaze drones of Israel proved to be the game changers as also other weaponry from Israel. Azerbaijan holds the key in Caucasus region for Israel. Its citizens carried three flags - those of Israel, Turkey and Azerbaijan after its victory in November 2020 in second Nagorno-Karabakh war. It was a strong message depicting the growing relationship between the two nations.

Baku has committed to further strengthen the relations with Israel much to the ire and agony of Iran. Iran is highly skeptical of Shia' majority Baku to be friendly with Jerusalem. There is a perceived threat to Azerbaijan from Iran on this count. If Iran does not choose the direct

conflict with Israel, it may use its socio-political influence in Azerbaijan causing the disturbance by inciting Islamist groups using media and propaganda, thus destabilizing the country.

Azerbaijan is a major energy supplier and a key pillar of good relations for Israel in South Caucasus region whereas Israel is a major arms and weaponry provider to Azerbaijan and a counter-balance in this region against the military and economic heavy weights, Russia and Iran.

With present good relations and further strengthening and consolidation of relationship, Greece and Israel, both have good potential of being benefited economically in several sectors such as energy, environment, shipping, education, defense, agriculture, trade, tourism etc. Geopolitically they require each other to face the multiple security challenges in East Mediterranean region and promote development and stability in this region. Turkish foreign policy designs have certainly propelled both the countries to come closer apart from the cooperation in the energy realm. The East-Med Pipeline, worth a billion dollars project, that carries gas from offshore deposits in Southeastern Mediterranean to continental Europe to satisfy their energy needs, thus limiting dependence on Russia is also a major block building the friendly relationship.

Greece and Azerbaijan share a long-standing historical relationship of ancient times, have no any bilateral political problems. Both are strategic energy partners and are mutually benefited. Another relevant and potential sector is of tourism. As of 23 of May of this year Baku and Athens will be connected by Aegean airlines – the only direct flight., tourism and cultural exchange. Expertise of Greece in renewables energy, maritime transportation and agriculture another possible area of interactions.

### **Tentative Conclusion: Way ahead**

*For Israel*, Azerbaijan fits into the outflanking strategy of Israel wherein it is forging relationships with the nations against the rise of terrorist incidents in middle east countries. As per one of the articles in DOAJ.org, “the Israeli strategic planners are talking of "spheres of containment" wherein countries like Cyprus, Greece, Azerbaijan, and Ethiopia constitute a kind of new periphery.”

*For Greece*, the situation in the favorable if the friendly matrix of relationship continues as it gets energy from Azerbaijan thus making it one of the most crucial energy hubs in transferring the oil and natural gas extracted offshore from the East Mediterranean Sea in general. It thus

supplies the energy demands to continental Europe, limiting the dependency on Russia. Greece and Azerbaijan leave doors open for other areas of collaboration such as tourism, agriculture, maritime transportations, culture and in general people-to-people contacts. Furthermore, Greece and Azerbaijan have excellent relations with Israel, so the latter can also contribute to these bilateral relations.

*For Azerbaijan*, is between Turkey, Iran and Russia, the military and economic heavy weights in the region with top priority of keeping its territorial integrity and strengthening/building good-neighborly relations and mutually beneficial cooperation with countries of the region and beyond. China is also not far away and will like to show its presence.

*In essence*, the Caucasus and the East Mediterranean regions have uncertainty and unpredictability dominate the near and immediate future unless de-stabilizing factors in terms of staunch nationalism, regional power projections and religious dominance pave way to multilateralism through multi-lateral governance in pursuit of common goals by the nation states complemented by bilateral and multi-lateral alliances.

It would be nice to add more positive inputs into perspectives of cooperation from Caspian to Mediterranean regions if all countries of the wider region refrain from territorial claims and policies of dominance.

## References:

1. Abu Amer, D.A. (2022). *Why are relations between Azerbaijan and Israel developing now?* [online] Middle East Monitor. Available at: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20221201-why-are-relations-between-azerbaijan-and-israel-developing-now/>.
2. Azerbaijan. (n.d.). *Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline | Who we are | Home*. [online] Available at: [https://www.bp.com/en\\_az/azerbaijan/home/who-we-are/operationsprojects/pipelines/btc.html](https://www.bp.com/en_az/azerbaijan/home/who-we-are/operationsprojects/pipelines/btc.html).
3. country.eiu.com. (n.d.). *Country, industry and risk analysis from The Economist Intelligence Unit - List of countries - The Economist Intelligence Unit*. [online] Available at: <https://country.eiu.com/AllCountries.aspx>.
4. Hasanova, G. (2014). *AZERBAIJANI-GREEK RELATIONS: NEW VISION*. [online] rieras.gr. Available at: <https://rieas.gr/researchareas/global-issues/eurasian-studies/2254-azerbaijani-greek-relations-new-vision>.

5. Iddon, P. (2022). *MyBib – A New FREE APA, Harvard, & MLA Citation Generator*. [online] MyBib. Available at: <https://www.mybib.com/#/projects/1x0yaP/citations>.
6. Inss.org.il. (2023). Available at: <https://www.inss.org.il/inss-2017-global-go-think-tank-index-report/>.
7. MAARIV (2023). Azerbaijan-Israel ties continue to strengthen after FMs talk. *The Jerusalem Post* | *JPost.com*. [online] 23 Jan. Available at: <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-728808>.
8. Slusher, L. (2021). *The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War*. [online] deepdivewithleeslusher.substack.com. Available at: <https://deepdivewithleeslusher.substack.com/p/the-2020-nagorno-karabakh-war#:~:text=The%202020%20Nagorno-Karabakh%20War%20took%20place%20from%20September>.
9. Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP). (n.d.). *Home*. [online] Available at: <https://www.tap-ag.com/>.
10. Vassiliou, A. (2014). *GREEK – AZERBAIJANI RELATIONS REVISITED*. [online] rieras.gr. Available at: <https://rieas.gr/researchareas/global-issues/asian-studies/2162-greek--azerbaijani-relations-revisited->.
11. www.agora.mfa.gr. (n.d.). *Home - Διεθνείς Οικονομικές Σχέσεις*. [online] Available at: <https://www.agora.mfa.gr/en/>.
12. www.gica.global. (2017). *International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC)*. [online] Available at: <https://www.gica.global/initiative/international-north-south-transport-corridor-instc>.
13. www.mfa.gr. (n.d.). *Greece's Bilateral Relations*. [online] Available at: <https://www.mfa.gr/en/blog/greece-bilateral-relations/azerbaijan/>
14. www.timesofisrael.com. (n.d.). *Israel-Azerbaijan relations*. [online] Available at: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/topic/azerbaijan-israel/>.



