



## AZERBAIJAN AND ISRAEL—GENUINE MUSLIM-JEWISH RELATIONS

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In a recent article in The Hill, What Azerbaijan wants from Israel? author, Areg Galstyan, expounds on the growing bilateral ties between the State of Israel and the Republic of Azerbaijan. Presumably, drawing a correlation between these close ties and the recent visit to Azerbaijan of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Galstyan brings forth some truths and some accurate portrayals.

However, in the end, the article denigrates bilateral relations between Azerbaijan and Israel while, simultaneously, spreading anti-Semitic tropes. This, while promoting harmful identity politics and misrepresenting an internationally recognized portion of Azerbaijan occupied by Armenia and referred to only by Armenia as the Nagorno Karabakh Republic.

Galstyan is correct that Azerbaijan and Israel enjoy close bilateral ties. However, these relations are not relegated to arms and oil only. Ties include numerous endeavors, including in the realms of energy, arms, but also in agriculture, technology and perhaps, most importantly, in politics and diplomacy, inter-religious and inter-ethnic relations and on and on.

Israel buys roughly 40 percent of its oil from Azerbaijan, while Azerbaijan acts as a trusted advisor vis a vis the development of Israel's own indigenous natural gas reserves. Azerbaijan purchases billions worth of military equipment to protect its citizens from its quasi-rogue neighbor. Azerbaijan's most recent purchase, Israel's Iron Dome anti-missile system, is the most advanced on the globe. Developed by Israel to protect its citizenry

from terrorists like Hamas and Hezbollah, Azerbaijan will utilize Iron Dome for the same purposes, although to defend against Armenia.

There are many positives to highlight regarding Azerbaijan and Israel, not the least of which is that these two nations prove the viability of a Jewish state and a Muslim-majority state serving as true and steadfast allies to one another and that Muslims and Jews can, indeed, coexist. It is not simply a matter of just getting along, but thriving with and because of the other.

Seemingly the thrust of Mr. Galstyan's article, though, is to misleadingly convey that Azerbaijan actively seeks close ties with Israel to avail itself of the Jewish lobby in the United States. In the world of politics and diplomacy, this supposition is, not to put too fine a point on it, exceptionally ridiculous.

Of equal import, it uses an age-old anti-Semitic trope--questioning the allegiance of American Jews, as according to him, Azerbaijan looks to use American Jews to its own ends, presumably because Jews in America call the shots in Israel and vice versa. This allegiance argument, used through the ages, gives credence to expulsions, ethnic cleansing and murder.

It is shocking when examined more deeply and while also taken with the prolific, profuse and systemic anti-Semitism that exists throughout the government of Armenia, that nation's oligarchy and even its general populace. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) is well-noted on this topic, as are leaders and academics throughout the world.

The reality is that roughly 800,000 Jews lived in Azerbaijan prior to the fall of the Soviet Union. The Sephardic portion lived in Azerbaijan for the last more than 1500 years [ ] the Babylonian exile. The other segment of Jews, the Ashkenazi, live mostly in Baku and arrived fleeing Tsarist and Bolshevik pogroms.

Interesting-- Jews fleeing anti-Semitism to live with and amongst Muslims. Any Jew in Azerbaijan will tell you, with just a hint of disdain at the suggestion, that little or no anti-Semitism exists or ever existed in their nation.

During the dissolution of the USSR, as in many Soviet republics and regions, Jews left fearing outbreaks of anti-Semitism. Many of these Azerbaijani Jews went to Israel and when it was evident that a new, stable, prosperous and Western-leaning nation was born with the renowned Heydar Aliyev as its head, they began to return to visit old friends and family, to do business and to bring their new country and the old one closer together. Thus, was the genesis of Israel-Azerbaijan relations.

In terms of Azerbaijan in the United States, the nations maintain a strong and robust strategic partnership, one that promises to be strengthened under the incoming Trump administration. As far as Azerbaijan and American Jews, there exists a close affinity similar to that of Muslims and Jews in Azerbaijan. It is only natural that Azerbaijani expats and diplomats would seek close ties with American Jews.

It is a success story for the modern world.

Opinion articles, op-eds are valuable, even critical, to the American journalistic experience. By their nature, they comprise the opinion of the writer. When written by an expert, one educated and respected on the topic or discipline, the reader receives an often-useful perspective on a given issue. Alternately, when the writer is a purveyor of identity politics, anti-Semitism and true bias, in favor of informed and expert opinion, the reader receives decidedly less.

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*The views expressed by authors are their own and not the views of The Hill.*

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