

Between Geopolitics and Identity Struggle: Why Israel Took Sides with Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

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PRIF REPORT

PEACE RESEARCH INSTITUTE FRANKFURT / LEIBNIZ-INSTITUT HESSISCHE STIFTUNG FRIEDENS- UND KONFLIKTFORSCHUNG



ELDAD BEN AHARON //

**BETWEEN GEOPOLITICS AND IDENTITY
STRUGGLE:
WHY ISRAEL TOOK SIDES WITH AZERBAIJAN
IN THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT**

PRIF Report 1/2023

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Cover:

December 10, 2020: A Heron-1 MK II medium altitude long endurance (MALE) unmanned aerial vehicle manufactured by Israel Aircraft Industries takes part in a military parade in Baku, Azerbaijan.
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The second Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) war began on 27 September 2020. It lasted 44 days and ended with the decisive victory of Azerbaijan. Baku's alliance with Israel and Turkey enabled its military to assume a winning position on the battlefield against Yerevan. Quite surprisingly, Israel was a key player in the 2020 conflict: for the duration of this conflict in the South Caucasus, Israel's technology and arms were put to use extensively by Azerbaijan's military against Armenia.

Israel's position in the NK conflict was highly relevant and part of a bigger research puzzle. The conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia has yielded four important and intertwined gains for Jerusalem over the last three decades: (A) an alliance with two Muslim countries in the region (Turkey and Azerbaijan); (B) a good strategic position against the Islamic Republic of Iran and its nuclear project against Israel; (C) increased arms sales and oil trading between Israel and Azerbaijan; and (D) Israel's firm policy of not recognising the 1915 Armenian genocide, as a mark of support for Turkey and Azerbaijan, helps Israel to keep its place at the top of a 'hierarchy of victimhood' and preserves the Holocaust's uniqueness. The first three of these factors can be seen as mainly realist in nature, leading to material gains such as arms sales, oil trading, and protection from a nuclear Iran. As the title 'Between Geopolitics and Identity Struggle' suggests, there is tension between the first three factors and the last one. It specifically refers to a social construction of identity; namely, Israel's Holocaust memory, and indeed, its national identity as the only Jewish state and the bastion of Zionist ideology. This paper shows how both geopolitical factors and identity struggle come into play and interlink to explain why Israel supports Azerbaijan.

This report focuses on a key question: to what extent do social constructions of various factors of security, and of national and cultural identity, predicate Israel's support of Azerbaijan in the 2020 armed conflict in NK? In this paper I make the following argument: Israel's support of Azerbaijan in the 2020 NK conflict is underpinned by two historical-identity factors stemming from the late Cold War: first, the '1979 moment' and second, the 'one nation, two states' concept. The '1979 moment' refers to a key juncture in Middle Eastern Cold War history – the Islamic revolution of that year that changed Iran's national identity, the impacts of which persist to the present day. One of the outcomes of the '1979 moment' was the close alliance that emerged between Israel and the second largest Muslim country in the region, Turkey. This alliance, which was built during the late 1980s and 1990s, led to Israel's support of Azerbaijan when the latter declared its independence in 1991.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Between 27 September and 10 November 2020, Israel's defence industries were very busy as the 'Second Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) War' was launched between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Unbeknownst to many, Israel actually played a key role: during this conflict in the South Caucasus, Israel's technology and arms were put to use extensively by Azerbaijan's military against Armenia. Israel's President Reuven Rivlin (2014–2021) noted that 'Israel has longstanding relations with Azerbaijan. However, the cooperation between the two countries is not aimed against any side'. (*Times of Israel*, October 2020). The evidence documented in various news outlets demonstrates otherwise: Baku's alliance with Israel and Turkey enabled its military to assume a winning position on the battlefield against Yerevan. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) reported that Israel supplied 60 per cent of all Azerbaijan's arms imports between 2015 and 2019 (Wezeman et al. 2021b).

Among these arms were the SandCat armoured car and several rifle models. Israel also supplied Baku with military drones, which overwhelmed Armenia's air defence systems and tipped the balance towards Azerbaijan. Pieter D. Wezeman, Alexandra Kuimova and Jordan Smith argue that 'While there is sufficient information available publicly to determine the types of weapon supplied by Israel to Azerbaijan, little is known about the actual number of arms transferred'. That said, they also noted that 'Israel accounted for 27 per cent of Azerbaijan's imports of major arms over the decade 2011–20' (Wezeman et al. 2021a). During the 44 days of the war, Harop drones produced by Israel Aerospace Industries were seen in the skies above Stepanakert. It was also recorded that the Azerbaijani military used Israeli-produced M095 DPICM and LAR-160 cluster munitions in the war against Armenia (Wezeman et al. 2021b, Ben-Ephraim, October 2020; Melman, 22 October 2020; Edwards, 12 November 2020). Wezeman et al. also point out that 'Israel delivered HAROP loitering munitions to Azerbaijan for the first time around 2015. They were reportedly used in border skirmishes in 2016 and saw widespread use in 2020' (Wezeman et al. 2021a).

At first glance, Israel seems like an irrelevant or marginal actor in this ex-territory of the Soviet Union. The NK conflict may even be seen as something of a 'red herring', obscuring Israel's real interest in the region. Yet, Israel's position in the NK conflict is highly relevant and part of a larger research puzzle. The ongoing (2023) conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia has yielded four important and intertwined gains for Jerusalem over the last three decades: (A) an alliance with two Muslim countries in the region (Turkey and Azerbaijan); (B) a good strategic position against the Islamic Republic of Iran and its nuclear project against Israel; (C) increased arm sales and oil trading between Israel and Azerbaijan; and (D) Israel's firm policy of not recognising the 1915 Armenian genocide¹, as a mark of support for Turkey and Azerbaijan, helps Israel to keep its place at the top of a 'hierarchy of victimhood' and preserves the Holocaust's uniqueness. (see e.g. Bauer 2001; Moses 2021: 395–477; Ben Aharon 2019c: 349, 2018: 459–476).

1 The term 'genocide' is used throughout this report to describe the 1915 Armenian genocide perpetrated by the Ottoman Empire. According to extensive scholarly literature, 1.5 million Armenians from Turkey's historical Armenian population were killed in massacres and death marches.



Fig. 1: Map of the region. Source: https://www.d-maps.com/carte.php?num_car=66536&lang=de (personal editing).

The first three of these factors can be seen as mainly realist in nature, leading to material gains such as arms sales, oil trading, and protection from a nuclear Iran. The last factor, however, refers to a social construction of identity; namely, Israel's Holocaust memory, and indeed, its national identity as the only Jewish state and the bastion of Zionist ideology. This factor arguably influences and underlies all the previous factors and adds another layer to the analysis. This paper aims to focus on the fourth factor, by questioning the extent to which the social construction of security and national identity and cultural identity factors underpins Israel's support of Azerbaijan. From this perspective, I refer to how Israel's state elite – specifically, consecutive governments – shape social constructions of national identity that frame the competing alliances among Israel, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Iran.

This paper draws heavily on recently published secondary literature, news reports, policy reports, blog posts, published interviews, and a declassified cable from WikiLeaks. I make the following argument: Israel's support of Azerbaijan in the 2020 NK conflict is underpinned by two historical factors stemming from the late Cold War: first, the '1979 moment' and second, the 'one nation, two states' concept. The '1979 moment' refers to a key juncture and a tectonic shift in Middle Eastern Cold War history – the Islamic revolution of that year that changed Iran's national identity, the impacts of which persist to the present day. One of the outcomes of the '1979 moment' was the close alliance that emerged between Israel and the second biggest Muslim country in the region, Turkey. This alliance, which was built during the late 1980s and 1990s, led to Israel's support of Azerbaijan when the latter declared its independence in 1991. Specifically, it was Turkey's characterisation of itself and Azerbaijan as 'one nation, two states' that gave Israel the opportunity and the motive to build its alliance with Baku. Iran's close alliance with the Republic of Armenia and Tehran's harsh rhetoric against the Israeli-Azerbaijani alliance, as well as the ongoing threat of its nuclear programme, made Israel's support of Azerbaijan in the 2020 conflict a natural strategic choice.

The analysis of this paper is structured in five main parts, using a historical approach. Chapter two provides a short historical and geopolitical context of the emergence of the NK conflict in 1988. Chapter three charts Israel's position in this conflict by re-examining its relations with Iran in seminal moments in the last decade of the Cold War, and after the 1979 Islamic revolution prior to the emergence of the NK conflict. This part of the paper builds a foundation for the subsequent sections, as it provides a broad historical overview of the above-mentioned identity factors that drove Israel to become a bitter enemy of Iran after 1979 and build a close alliance with Turkey, the second-largest Muslim country in the Middle East. This is the main vein of this paper, because it shows how Israel found itself in the natural strategic position of supporting Azerbaijan – a satellite country of Turkey – following massive investment in ties with Ankara during the 1990s. Against this background, and the intensification of its tensions with Iran, in the final two parts Israel's relations with both Azerbaijan and Armenia are assessed.

2. THE GEOPOLITICS OF THE NK CONFLICT: A SHORT HISTORY

The scope of the NK conflict and its relevance to the region and beyond should be introduced as the first step in this paper. Substantial academic and policy-related literature has studied the NK conflict from various perspectives: historically, geopolitically, in terms of third-party involvement, and more (see e.g. Abilov and Mahmudlu 2022; Cornell 2000; Gafarli 2022; Yavuz and Gunter 2022; Broers 2019; Der Matossian and Kasbarian 2022). The context and the significance of the NK conflict is multidisciplinary. Recently, for example, M. Hakan Yavuz and Michael M. Gunter noted that:

Karabakh has significant relevance for ethnic conflict studies in general, post-Soviet conflict studies in particular, and great power struggles involving Russia, Turkey, Iran, and even further afoot including among others, the United States and the European Union. [...] Karabakh also has implications for the international oil and gas market transfer from Azerbaijan (rich in oil from time immemorial) to outlets around the world. (Yavuz and Gunter 2022: 1)

Broers also noted that 'all observers agree on the importance of geopolitics to the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict' (Broers 2019: 9). And another account frames this conflict as a 'major pressure point' in Eurasia's competitive geopolitics, located along the fault line between Russia's 'near abroad', the European Union (EU)'s Eastern Partnership, and the interests of regional powers such as Turkey and Iran (see *ibid.*; Cornell 2017: 16). Der Matossian recently noted that '[t]he history of Nagorno-Karabagh (Artsakh in Armenian) and its contested claim has been a major source of contention not only in the historiography but among the Armenians and the Azerbaijanis themselves, leading to two devastating wars that have taken the lives of more than thirty-five thousand people' (Der Matossian and Kasbarian 2022, 531).

Historically, the NK conflict emerged in 1988 with the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the independence of the Republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan. The roots of this conflict should be placed in a broader 20th century context, however. In the 1920s, the Soviet government established the NK region as an autonomous region within the Soviet Socialist Republic of Azerbaijan, even though 95

per cent of the population of the NK region is ethnically Armenian (Lindenstrauss 2015: 98–99; Khurshudyan 2022; Imranli-Lowe 2022: 24–29). Moreover, under Soviet rule, the tensions between the two countries were kept silent for obvious reasons. When the Soviet Union began to collapse in the late 1980s, however, and the independence of both the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan was established, this conflict escalated into a full-scale war.

In 1988, as part of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, NK was made an autonomous region. In the same year, however, the Armenians residing in NK declared that they wished to secede from Azerbaijan; their legislature passed a resolution to join the Republic of Armenia, despite the region's legal location within Azerbaijan's borders. The literature identifies two main rounds of the violence/war in NK since 1988. The first round is known as the first NK War (1988–1994): In this war, conflict erupted due to the territorial claims of Armenia over historical Azerbaijani lands (Abilov and Mahmudlu 2022: 131). Between 1992 and 1994, Azerbaijan lost to Armenia seven sub-regions in and around NK: Kalbajar, Lachin, Fuzili, Aghdam, Jabrayil, Gubadli, and Zengilan (Gafarli 2022: 348). This process led to an occupation of 20 per cent of Azerbaijani lands, leading the United Nations (UN) Security Council to adopt four resolutions (namely, 822, 853, 874, and 884) condemning the occupation of these regions. The resolutions asked all nations to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, and demanded the cessation of hostilities and hostile acts that endangered peace and security in the region as well as the immediate, full, and unconditional withdrawal of all occupying forces from all occupied territories of Azerbaijan (Abilov and Mahmudlu 2022: 131).



Fig. 2: Map of Nagorno-Karabakh before the 2020 conflict. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nagorno-Karabakh_Map2.png (CC BY-SA 4.0, personal editing).



Fig. 3: Ceasefire agreement in 2020. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2020_Karabagh_Ceasefire.svg (CC BY-SA 4.0, personal editing).

During the interwar period from 1994 to 2020, the NK conflict simmered in the background as Armenia continued its occupation of the above sub-regions. The second NK war, also known as the 44 days war, began on 27 September 2020, with a counter-offensive operation along the entire front as the Azerbaijani army began liberating the territories that had been occupied by Armenia since the first Nagorno-Karabakh war. The second war demonstrated the strength of the Azerbaijani army and ended with the decisive victory of Azerbaijan.

Area studies literature takes three main approaches to the NK conflict. The first examines it in the context of the Caucasus as multi-ethnic region, which has mostly remained peaceful, but since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 has followed the 'script of post-Soviet wars'. As noted by Christoph Zurcher, ethnic demography in the post-Soviet region has constituted the common origins of conflicts in this region. These conflicts and ethnic groups were 'institutionalised by the Soviet state, the security vacuum following its collapse, the weakness of successor states and incompatible nationalist ideologies' (Zurcher 2007: 7; Broers 2019: 4).

A second approach examines NK as a 'frozen conflict'. The NK conflict is seen as part of larger set of conflicts in the post-communist 'near abroad', and dependent on Euro-Atlantic powers seeking to expand European security (see e.g. Toal 2011: 3; Simão 2018; Broers 2019: 5). The 2014 conflict in eastern Ukraine and Russia's annexation of Crimea have solidified understandings of 'frozen conflict' – aggregated into 'Putin's frozen conflicts' – as part of a wider repertoire of coercive diplomacy in a higher-order geopolitical contest (Orttung and Walker 2015).

The third approach is outlined by Laurence Broers in his 2019 study. He looks at the NK conflict through a lens of 'critical geopolitics analysis' (Broers 2019: 9). This term goes beyond both the 'frozen conflict' narrative and the post-Soviet context. As Broers argues, NK has special features that set it apart from other conflicts in the region. He notes that 'new dynamics are at work that are no longer meaningfully "post-Soviet", but rather thoroughly contemporary' (Broers 2019: 5). With the lens of 'critical geopolitics analysis' Broers refers to competitive influence-seeking by outside powers and challenges the frequently used categories of 'Armenia' and 'Azerbaijan' (the nation-states) as weak frameworks for analysis of the NK conflict. He claims that, on the contrary, scholars and other stakeholders should refer to the 'Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict', which is inclusive of diaspora communities and regional actors (Broers 2019: xii–xiii). Given that the focus of this paper is on Israel and the 2020 NK war, and especially because it argues that Israel's position on the conflict builds on social construction and identity politics as well, Broers' approach informs this paper's analysis. His approach also allows the NK wars to be framed as a conflict that goes beyond its geography to encompass identity politics, diaspora-homeland schisms, genocide denial and recognition.

The means for this inquiry is the close examination of how geopolitical and identity construction actors intertwined in this conflict: namely, Israel's relations with two other regional actors, Iran and Turkey, each of which has also been deeply involved in NK. The paper suggests that Israel's initial position in the NK conflict stems from late Cold War diplomacy and changing alliances during the late 1970s and most of the 1980s. Building on this analysis, it then turns to examine how Israel found itself in the position of supporting Azerbaijan in its dispute with the Republic of Armenia and how this then fits into the broader regional geopolitical puzzle with Turkey and Iran.

3. ISRAEL-IRAN RELATIONS AND THE 1979 ISLAMIC REVOLUTION

Having briefly summarised approaches to the NK conflict and its emergence, I now turn to chart the historical circumstances that drove Israel to support Turkey and then Azerbaijan. To get a better grasp of how Israel has found itself in the position of supporting Azerbaijan in the NK armed conflict, one needs to revisit the closing year of an earlier decade: the '1979 moment' in Middle East Cold War history. The scholarship on Israeli-Iranian relations points to massive cooperation between Israel and Iran under the Shah prior to the Iranian revolution of 1979. The works of Uri Bialer, Aharon Klieman, Uri Bar-Joseph and Yitzhak Mualem emphasise the 'realist paradigm' in Israel's foreign policy thought, examining the latter through the lens of the Israeli-Arab conflict and Israel's survival in the region (see e.g. Bar-On 2000: 107–127; Inbar 1998; Bialer 2020). Needless to say, given the realist lens it applies, this literature has, for the most part, tended to overlook the constructivist view – the socially constructed identity factors of Jerusalem's relations with Teheran such as, e.g., pro-Western and secular identity, and the alliance with the United States (US) in the Cold War. The realist view has, however, contributed to our understanding of the economic dimension of Israeli-Iranian relations, namely the oil pipeline from Eilat to Ashkelon and, to some extent, the nature of the clandestine relationship between Tehran and Jerusalem during the Shah's administration – namely the training of his secret police, the SAVAK, by the Mossad (Bialer 1990, 2007; Mualem 2012: 201).



Fig. 4: Two armed militants outside the Embassy of the United States, Tehran. Behind them is a banner saying 'Long live anti-imperialism and democratic forces'. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Enghlab_Iran.jpg (Public Domain).

However, from 1977, the Shah's hold on power was progressively weakened. Israel was targeted by Khomeini, who subscribed to the notion that Jews in the US and Israel possessed a 'magical power' of influence over politics and policy in Washington and framed and narrated this as harmful to Iranian national interests and as ally of the Shah's allegedly corrupt regime. From that point on, popular protest movements mounted and led by Khomeini from exile (1964–1979) motivated millions of Iranians to ultimately remove the Shah from office and launch the 1979 Islamic revolution. The '1979 moment' was a term coined by Amir Moosavi in 2017. He elaborated in an interview his motivations for using the phrase and how 1979 impacted the Middle East:

It [1979] was astonishing year for the region that we call the 'Middle East'. In the course of a single year, the world witnessed a series of events that, although unconnected to one another in their causality, dramatically shifted the social, political and cultural trajectories of many of the countries that make up Arab and Persianate worlds. In less than 365 days, Khomeini took over power in Iran following the 1978–79 revolution, Egypt enacted a peace treaty with Israel, Islamist insurgents seized the Grand Mosque of Mecca, Saddam Hussein assumed full control over Iraq and the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. At the same time, the Lebanese Civil War raged in the background, a major uprising that would culminate in a massacre was brewing in Syria, and in not-so-distant Pakistan, a mob of angry protestors burned the American embassy. All of these events were connected with the emergence of various strains of political Islam and the serious decline of the political left in the region. (Moosavi 2017)

Moosavi underlines the degree to which 1979 impacted on the Middle East and Iran's Cold War allies. He stresses how a number of revolutions and regime changes took place in less than one year. First and foremost, this section focuses on Iran. Not only did the 1979 Islamic revolution change Iran's national identity, with impacts persisting to the present day, but it also thoroughly shook the alliance between Jerusalem and Teheran, with Israel losing three decades' (1950–1979) worth of massive diplomatic investment in relations with Iran under the Shah (Ben Aharon 2021: 10). Iran and Israel went from a state of regional cooperation to one of bitter and controversial relations (see e.g. Sobhani 1989; Parsi 2007; Furlan 2022). From Israel's point of view, there was concern during the late Cold War that the momentum of the Islamic revolution might prove contagious in the Middle East and strike in Turkey, a country built on secular, political tradition with a suppressed Muslim (Sunni) population. These fears were not based on speculation alone: in the late 1970s Turkey suffered from deep financial hardship and social crisis, during which a pro-Islamic strand dominated Turkey's foreign policy. There was also domestic political tension between the secular and the pro-Islamist sections of the Turkish political landscape, influenced by Necmettin Erbakan and the emergence of the National Salvation Party, Milli Selamet Partisi, 1972–1980 (Karpas 1981: 1–43, specifically, 40–41; Uzer 2017: 22–39). I will revisit the contagious political angle of the '1979 moment' in the subsequent section about Israeli-Turkish relations.

3.1 POST-COLD WAR ISRAEL-IRAN RELATIONS: MUTUAL HOSTILITY

After grasping the core late-Cold War realities of Israeli-Iranian relations, one can now build on this history to better contextualise the early phases of the NK conflict, and to understand how the more recent brand of Israeli-Iranian enmity came about. Since the mid-1990s, and especially in the last two decades (2000–2020), the tensions between Israel and Iran turned into mutual hostility. Iran called for the destruction of Israel and the 'Zionist entity' and promoted a strong Holocaust denial narrative, most famously expressed by former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who served as the sixth president of Iran from 2005 to 2013 (Litvak 2006: 273–280). This Holocaust denial lexicon frequently applied terms such as the 'big lies' and the 'Holocaust myth'. Ahmadinejad was not alone in this campaign. Supreme Leader Khamene'i asserted in April 2001 that 'Zionists had exaggerated Nazi crimes against European Jewry in order to solicit international support for the establishment of the Zionist entity in 1948 [so that a] large number of non-Jewish hooligans and thugs of Eastern Europe were forced to migrate to Palestine as Jews' (Litvak 2006: 274).

Arming Hizballah, a satellite Shia organisation, to threaten Israel's security from its northern border with Lebanon has been a key mission of Iran since the 1980s. The work of Amir Lupovici demonstrated how securitization² of the Iranian nuclear project in Israel, which began in the 1990s, reached a new peak during Binyamin Netanyahu's second administration between 2009 and 2013 (Lupovici

2 'Securitization theory' was initially developed in the early 1990s by Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, and Jaap de Wilde as a constructivist and critical approach to the study of security. It was developed in the post-Cold War period in an attempt to re-frame the concept of security that underpinned not only military security, but also political, societal, economic, and environmental security, and was posited as a valuable lens to understand security threats (Buzan et al. 1998).

2016: 413–432). Furthermore, as noted by Christian Kaunert and Ori Wertman in their recent work (2020), Iran launched a hybrid war against Israel (Kaunert and Wertman 2020: 100). The work of Kaunert and Wertman joins the recent research conducted by Amir Lupovici and Uriel Abulof, which focuses on the securitization dynamics between Iran and Israel (Lupovici 2016; Kaunert and Wertman 2020). This group of scholars points out the importance of understanding these countries' conflicts using securitization dynamics, which explores how subjective social issues transform into security threats.

The identity-based security processes point to the importance of identity-based foreign policy in the wider Middle East in the post-Cold War period and Israel's role in this debate. These processes also make the NK conflict an identity-based conflict: not only with regard to the conflicting parties of Armenia and Azerbaijan, but also the security policies and securitization of Israel, Turkey and Iran as third-party regional countries that have been involved in the conflict. Pivotal to the NK conflict and Israel's position within it are the acute tensions between Israel and Iran that turned into mutual hostility. Set against this context of hostility, in the remaining parts of this paper we can now sketch and trace the remaining puzzle pieces of the region and the alliances built on identity and security.

The recent study by Amnon Aran re-emphasises the use of a social constructivist approach supplemented with securitization dynamics in understanding Israel's foreign policy in the post-Cold War era (Aran 2021). His work offers an in-depth examination of how domestic factors in Israel's cultural arena shaped its foreign policy in the post-Cold War. Aran's approach emphasises, from the bottom up, how some issues in Israel's foreign policy and national security 'are filtered, understood and interpreted by the domestic actors, which then [shape] Israeli foreign policy towards a range of issues, in significant ways'. This actor-focussed approach allows Aran to re-examine Israel's foreign policy towards the Middle East in the context of its relations with the EU, the US, China and India in the post-Cold War period with reference to the NK conflict (Aran 2021: 1–11; Ben Aharon 2023b: 117).

4. THE GEOPOLITICAL PUZZLE: ISRAELI-TURKISH RELATIONS AFTER THE '1979 MOMENT'

The importance of the '1979 moment' to Middle East geopolitics and to Israel's isolation in the Arab region cannot be underestimated (see e.g. Lesch 2001; Black 2009: 5–6). Moosavi did not mention in his account that the revolutionary momentum did not, in fact, skip Turkey. However, following populist Muslim uprisings, on 12 September 1980 a military coup re-established the prevalence of secularism through the most violent military takeover in Turkey's modern history. As Alp Yenen puts it, the coup returned Turkey to its 'default settings' (Yenen 2019).

Despite their many differences, Iran and Turkey both held a key role in the regional stability of the Middle East during the Cold War. Both of these Muslim countries were also pivotal to Israel's ability to break the isolation imposed upon it by Arab countries during the Cold War. Along with Israel, both Iran and Turkey were American allies against Soviet subversion in the region (see e.g. Podesh 2022: 15–49; Bialer 2020: 109–135; Heller 2016). Therefore, one cannot overstate how critically important Turkey

and Iran were to Israel's regional stability before the 1979 Iranian revolution. The latter was a seminal moment for decades to come, establishing new geopolitical priorities for Israel as well as determining its future position in the NK conflict. After 1979, the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) was extremely anxious about contagious politics in the region and worried that a similar revolution could turn Turkey into a 'second Iran' (Yenen 2019). Back in the '1979 moment', Turkey became critical in maintaining the regional stability that Israel so badly needed, but Israeli diplomats were anxious that revolutionary momentum might influence the pro-Islamic factions in Turkey. It was thus strategically vital to Jerusalem that Ankara become Israel's ally (Ben Aharon 2019a, 2019b, 2021). Much of what happened between Israel and Turkey from this point forward effectively put Jerusalem on a trajectory towards supporting Azerbaijan in the NK conflict right up to the second war in 2020.

A short overview is needed to cover the relationship between Israel and Turkey. This can be roughly divided into four main periods. The *first* three decades of the relationship between Jerusalem and Ankara (1951–1978) have been described by scholars as the 'mistress syndrome' period, underpinned by the secret Phantom Pact doctrine initiated by Israeli policymakers, particularly Ben Gurion (see e.g. Schonmann 2013: 85–102; Almog and Sever 2017: 609–623; Gruen 1985: 33–43). This period was characterised by Israeli attempts to forge a distinctive role for itself in the non-Arab Middle East in the early 1960s. Although this pact had lost its core significance by the late 1960s, it had fostered fruitful diplomatic and intelligence exchanges between Israel, Iran, and Turkey.

The *second* period lasted from 1978 until 1990, which is critically important to this report. This period is critical because it develops our understanding of the tectonic shifts that occurred between Israel, Turkey, and Iran over the past 40 years. It is characterised by a deterioration in Israeli-Turkish relations to the lowest level of diplomatic representation. Set against the background of the '1979 moment', Turkey's domestic crises, and specifically its energy crisis between 1978 and 1980, served to shift Ankara's foreign policy toward the more anti-Israeli stance of the Arab nations and their demands to boycott Israel in return for supplying Turkey's energy needs (Ben Aharon 2019a 2019b, 2021).

The early 1990s mark the *third* period, known in the literature of Israeli-Turkish relations as the 'romantic period' (see e.g. Liel 2003: 185–188; Kushner 2016: 220; Bengio 2010). As Turkey's energy crisis and political instability were already improving by mid-1985, Turkey was already making first steps towards normalising its relations with Israel (Ben Aharon 2019b: 286–289). The Madrid conference of 1991, closely followed by the Oslo accords in 1993, reduced tensions in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, allowing Turkey to improve its relations with Israel without risking opposition and a backlash from the Arab and Muslim world. The third period was marked by increased military and economic cooperation, as well as a boost in tourism and cultural exchanges (on this see Bengio 2010: 80–89).

The *fourth* and most recent period, from early 2000 to the present (2023), has been termed 'Neo-Ottomanism', or more recently, 'post-Kemalist' (Tombuş and Aygenç 2017: 70; Yavuz 2020), in reference to the Islamic and Ottoman-inspired character of modern Turkey under Prime Minister/President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. In this period, Israeli-Turkish relations have slowly but surely deteriorated, in parallel with increasing Turkish support for the Palestinians and Hamas. This deteriora-

tion in relations has also been provoked by Israeli Prime Minister (PM) Binyamin Netanyahu's often inflammatory rhetoric towards Ankara. However, the relations between the two countries remained quite solid in terms of bilateral trade, which has increased despite the relations between Netanyahu and Erdoğan.

This paper focusses especially on the second and third periods of Israeli-Turkish relations, as it was then that path was laid for Israel's alignment with Azerbaijan in the NK conflict: not only because a deeper understanding of the geopolitics of the post-1979 moment in the Middle East is critical to the emergence of the conflict, but also because of the identity-related issues of this period that evolved around the Armenian terrorism campaign (1980s), and Turkey's denial of the Armenian genocide and normalisation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (1990s).

4.1 RAPPROCHEMENT IN ISRAELI-TURKISH RELATIONS AFTER THE SEPTEMBER 1980 MILITARY COUP

The September 1980 military coup was a turning point in Turkey's modern history. Specifically, Turkey had been facing an attack on its democracy, and sustained political violence from the proliferation of leftist, rightist, and separatist armed extremist groups in the country (Yenen 2019). This is an important and overlooked element of the historical background to Israeli-Turkish relations (Ben Aharon 2019a, 2019b, 2021). By December 1980, the military junta had decided to follow through with the Turkish MFA's earlier decision to relegate Israeli-Turkish relations to the level of chargé d'affaires. Given all the above, and the fact that from December 1980 Turkey had officially downgraded its relations with Israel to the lowest possible rank of diplomatic representation, the MFA found itself faced with a significant problem. From that point, the Israeli MFA started to make far-reaching efforts to engage with the Turkish MFA and military elite through various backchannels.

Knowing that the primary goals of the Turkish military junta centred on the fight against political violence at home, both from the far left and the right, and on Armenian terror attacks against Turkish diplomats abroad, Israeli diplomats tried to leverage Israel's counterterrorism expertise, and their understanding of the cooperation between the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA) and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), in order to restore relations with Turkey. Part of that effort, though, was to support Ankara's attempts to delegitimise the Armenian terror attacks by denying the history of Armenian genocide that represented Armenians' core grievance with Ankara's counterterrorism strategy (see Ben Aharon 2019a, 2021).

From the mid-1970s, two extremist Armenian diaspora groups, the ASALA, which operated out of Lebanon, and the Justice Commandos of the Armenian genocide (JCAG), operating mainly out of North America and Western Europe, carried out a series of assassinations of Turkish diplomats in Western Europe and the United States as well as in Turkey, Australia, and the Middle East (Lebanon) (Hyland 1991; Tololyan 1992 ; Dugan et al. 2008). These actions were geared towards achieving the key goals of the Armenian diaspora, usually referred to as the '3 Rs': first, recognition of the 1915 Armenian genocide; second, reparations from Turkey for the genocide, and third, restoration of the

ancestral homeland in eastern Anatolia (see e.g. Dugan et al. 2008: 346; Gunn 2012: 103–115; Kürkçü 2021: 263).

Turning back to the wave of Armenian terrorism in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Turkey's military junta led by Kenan Evren, chief of the general staff of the Turkish Armed Forces, formulated a new foreign policy strategy: embedding counter-terror discourse as a means for stopping the chaos at home and undermining the Armenian cause abroad. In this context, thus, Armenian terrorism was one of the threats faced by Turkey during what was a turbulent period, and the kind of terrorism the Armenians were pursuing was aligned with the other terrorism threats Turkey was tackling. The Armenian diaspora also sought to bring their forgotten 1915 genocide to the world's attention through peaceful methods such as academic conferences and lobbying. Nevertheless, for Turkey's MFA and the military elite, all diasporic Armenians were labelled as 'terrorists'. This image will become important to the framing of the 2020 NK conflict (Frantzman 2020).

The Israeli MFA put a strategic and very selective focus upon the cooperation between two terrorist organisations (ASALA and the PLO), which stood to bring them diplomatic gains while completely overlooking other examples of regional or ethnic cooperation. Israeli diplomats selected two geographically connected Middle Eastern organisations in order to make their cooperation seem more logical and persuasive. The Israeli diplomats were able to construct a framework of cooperation based on ethnicity, regionalism, and shared techniques (bombing methods and shared arms) upon a foundation of partial empirical evidence and research. Moreover, it was not purely a diplomatic endeavour: actors ranging from the intelligence elite such as Rafi Eitan, to university professors (Ariel Marri), to the military elite and journalists (such as Ori Dan), were tasked with providing Turkey's diplomats and journalists the information they needed to sell the ASALA-PLO network to the Turkish public and the military junta (Ben Aharon 2021: 18–19).

Israel's MFA focused on the specific needs of the counterparty: the Turkish military junta had declared combating terrorism as a national security interest and necessary to stop the chaos in the streets. Israeli diplomats also wanted to prevent an Islamic revolution like the one which had occurred in Iran a year earlier, and to defend the secular heritage of Kemalism. Given how the 1979 Iranian revolution had already isolated Israel in the Middle East, this outcome in particular was just as important to Jerusalem. This overlooked factor has been neglected by scholars who have studied Israeli-Turkish relations. It provides a template with which to understand Israel's policy on the contested memories of the Armenian genocide during the 1980s.

4.2 THE 1982 LEBANON WAR

On 3 June 1982, three armed Palestinian terrorists, Hussein Ghassan Said, Marwan al-Banna, and Nawaf al-Rosan, attempted to assassinate Israel's ambassador in London, Shlomo Argov (1979–1982), critically wounding the diplomat as he walked to his car. In response to this assassination attempt, the Israeli parliament (the Knesset) decided to invade southern Lebanon on 4 June 1982 to secure Israel's northern border from Palestinian terrorist organisations. Israel's invasion into south

Lebanon soon escalated into a full-scale war. Since this occurred in the midst of the crisis in Israeli-Turkish relations, and because of Turkey's close relations with the Arab countries that supplied its energy and the latter's pressure to boycott Israel, the Turks did not cooperate with Israel's invasion of Lebanon, although the two countries had mutual interests in uprooting anti-Turkish and anti-Israeli terrorist organisations from northern Lebanon (see e.g. Kürkçü 2021: 265; Kuznetsov 2015: 47; Ceylan 2021: 343).

Turning to the cooperation between the Palestinian terror organisations and ASALA, in June 1982 Israel destroyed Palestinian and ASALA training facilities in southern Lebanon, thereby hoping to regain Turkey's trust. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) also retrieved 28 files on Armenian terrorists. Israel could have forwarded these directly from the IDF to the Turkish Army or from Mossad to the Turkish National Intelligence Organisation (MIT). The MFA, however, wished to gain diplomatic leverage from these files (Ben Aharon 2019a, 2019b: 283–285).

The Armenian diaspora terrorism angle is relevant not only to Turkish denial of the Armenian genocide and to Israeli–Turkish relations in the 1980s. It is also relevant to the NK conflict and rifts between Turkey, Azerbaijan and Armenia: some of the leaders of ASALA went on to play an active role in the NK conflict. Among these was Monte Melkonian, a third-generation Armenian-American revolutionary and a member of ASALA during the 1980s (Vorbach 1994: 178; Broers 2019: 70). Melkonian is also well known for being a commander in the Armenian army fighting Azerbaijan during the First Nagorno-Karabakh War in the early 1990s. After ASALA dispersed, he was initially on the run for several years before turning up in Armenia in 1990 (de Waal 2003: 2007). As noted by Vorbach, 'Melkonian was a revolutionary personality motivated by the vision of an overthrow of the "chauvinist" leadership in Turkey and the establishment of a revolutionary socialist government (be it Turkish, Kurdish, Armenian or Soviet Armenian) under which Armenians could live freely in their historic homeland, which includes areas in present day Turkey' (Vorbach 1994: 178; Melkonian and Gpranyan-Melk'onyan 2007). Melkonian was 35 years of age when he died in 1993 while commanding 4,000 Armenians combatants in NK (Arax 1993). This connects the Armenian diaspora terrorism campaign to the relationship between Turkey, Israel, and NK and highlights continuities between late Cold War diplomacy and the post-Cold War era.

4.3 THE CONTESTED MEMORIES OF ARMENIAN GENOCIDE AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE NK CONFLICT (1985–1988)

Apart from ASALA and Armenian terrorism, which had an important role in the Israeli-Turkish rapprochement in the early 1980s, other late-Cold War factors concerning the contested memories of the Armenian genocide drove Turkey's concerns over the 3Rs and thus fostered normalisation between Ankara and Jerusalem. First, between 1978 and 1988, the US ethnic Armenian lobby put forward an initiative to include the 1915 Armenian Genocide in the United State Holocaust Memorial Museum (hereafter, USHMM) exhibition in Washington, DC. Given that most of the funds for the US memorial were based on US public donations, the US federal government launched 'A Campaign to Remember' (Report to the President 1979; Eder 2016: 16–50; Ben Aharon 2019, 2020c: 6–8). This

campaign was a golden opportunity for non-Jewish victims' organisations and American Cold War ally governments, such as Chancellor Helmut Kohl's in West Germany, who tried to influence the concept of the US memorial exhibition by making financial contributions. Despite a substantial donation (US\$ 3 million) to the memorial by Armenians based in California, Israel's high-level access to the US administration and to the US Congress provided the Turks with the essential aid to block the Armenian initiative (Ben Aharon 2019a, 2020c).

From Turkey's point of view, the ever-growing Armenian problem in the capital city of its most important North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) ally – which threatened to showcase Turkey to the US public as perpetrators of genocide side by side with the Nazi crimes – convinced Ankara that Jerusalem was a critically important ally. By 1985 the wave of Armenian terrorism was ebbing; however, during 1986 two other new Armenian fronts had emerged: Armenian Genocide resolutions in the European Parliament (late 1986), and thereby in the US Congress in 1987. Once again, as with USHMM, Israeli pressure on the US Congress to reject the Armenian resolution and prevent a Cold War crisis assured Turkey that Israel was its most powerful ammunition against the Armenians, prompting Ankara to further normalise relations with Jerusalem. This was increasingly becoming an open option to Turkey as its energy crisis and political instability began to improve in mid-1985 (Ben Aharon 2019b: 286–289).

From the Israeli MFA perspective, Yitzhak Lior, the former head of the Middle East research department in the MFA (1980–1987) explains the Israeli position on Turkey's decision to normalise relations. He recalls in an interview:

For Israel 1985 was a 'dream coming true'. When a Muslim nation such as Turkey approached us, and changed the status of our relations, it had an enormous impact. The Turkish delegation that arrived in Israel included one of their best diplomats at the time [Ekrem Güvendiren]. It opened the way for the normalisation of our relations formally. Moreover, we [MFA] understood that our path to diplomatic and economic success, including arms trades etc., goes through their [the Turks'] anxiety that we can help them with the 'Armenian problem' (Ben Aharon 2019b: 288).³

Towards the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1988, the legacy of this important decade became evident in Turkey's response to the new conflict developing in NK. In other words, the legacies of terrorism and Turkey's denial of the Armenian genocide cast light on the roots of the rivalry between Turkey and the Republic of Armenia and the Armenian diaspora, as well as that between the Republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan, respectively, and then specifically Israel's diplomatic position with respect to the intersection of these sensitive rivalries and its own evolving foreign policy aims. It is the contention of this paper that the legacy of the decisions made in the 1970s and 1980s continues to inform Israel's responses to the 2020 NK clashes.

3 The interview was originally conducted by this author and published in Ben Aharon 2019b. There has been some paraphrasing, but the original meaning remains.

This late Cold War geopolitical intersection of three factors: the normalisation of Israeli-Turkish relations, denial of the Armenian genocide, and the emergence of the NK conflict, aligns with the *third* period in relations between Ankara and Jerusalem as described in the previous section. With Israel's MFA supporting denial of the Armenian genocide in international forums, the early 1990s were considered the 'romantic period' in relations between Israel and Turkey (see e.g. Liel 2003: 185–8; Kushner 2016: 220; Bengio 2010). This phrase also reflecting Turkey's appreciation of Israeli support for its denial narrative and its high expectations that Israel would continue to deliver (Ben Aharon 2018: 459–476).

5. 'ONE NATION, TWO STATES': BUILDING THE ALLIANCE BETWEEN ISRAEL, TURKEY AND AZERBAIJAN (1990S)

Set against the '1979 moment' and the background set out in the previous sections that outline the trajectory of Israel and Turkey towards normalisation, this section leads us to firmly grasp how and why Israel found itself in the early 1990s in close cooperation with Azerbaijan over the NK conflict. On 9 November 1991, according to an official statement from its MFA, Turkey became the first state to recognize the Republic of Azerbaijan, which had declared its independence only three months earlier. Turkey has two consulates general in Nakhchivan and in Ganja, while Azerbaijan is represented by its Embassy in Ankara and two consulates general in Istanbul and Kars (Turkey MFA 2022). The former Azerbaijani president, the late Heydar Aliyev (1993–2003), described the alliance between the two countries as 'one nation, two states' (Ismayilov and Graham 2016; Erdoğan 2016).



Fig. 5: Picture taken on 16 October 2020 at a rally in Den Haag, the Netherlands, of Armenians demonstrating against the war in Nagorno-Karabakh and Israel's role in escalating the violence (Photo: Hanna Luden, who gave her consent to publish it in this report).

As previously noted at the outset of this paper, the social construction of security, national identity and cultural identity factors underpins Israel's support of Azerbaijan in the armed conflict in NK in 2020. These are also among the binding elements of the Turkish-Azerbaijani solidarity. In his speech, Erdoğan stated that 'Turkish-Azerbaijani cooperation is based not only on strong solidarity between our states, but also on common history and unity of our hearts. Turkish and Azerbaijani people speak the same language, have common history. Turkey and Azerbaijan have established the goal of building peace, stability and prosperity on a common geographical area' (Erdoğan 2016). However, this solidarity does not mean that Turkey and Azerbaijan do not have any differences or disagreements. As Galia Lindenstrauss noted, the İlham Heydar Aliyev regime (2003–present) views some of the Islamisation processes promoted by Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) with concern. These Islamisation processes contradict the secular legacy of Atatürk and are perceived as a threat to the secular nature of Azerbaijan as well (Lindenstrauss 2015: 73–74).

Turning back to Israel; while clearly excluded from the notion of 'one nation, two states', and obviously lacking the 'shared history and same language', since the early 1990s Israel has shared some common interests with both Turkey and Azerbaijan. Some scholars who work on the Israeli-Turkish-Azerbaijani alliance of the early 1990s and the subsequent decades focus on energy and economic cooperation (see e.g. Murinson 2008: 47; Göksel 2015: 656; Bishku 2009); all in all, as noted by Ilya Bourttman, it is the 'convergence of interests' in the Israeli-Azerbaijan alliance that helped to expand their ties further (Bourttman 2006: 47). First, these interests well fit into the perception of 'stability and prosperity on a common geographical area'. Similar to Turkey's secular identity in the pre- Erdoğan period (prior to 2002), Azerbaijan projects a secular identity that encourages good relations with the West, despite having a majority Shi'ite Muslim population.

Moreover, denial of the Armenian genocide is also one of the fundamentals of Turkey's Kemalist secular heritage and is a binding cultural identity element that is embedded in Turkey's heritage (see e.g. Nefes et al. 2022: 1–17). After the NK conflict broke out in 1988, Azerbaijan became an important player in the denial narrative of the 1915 genocide. Meanwhile, Israel, as noted in the previous sections, was invested in the denial campaign as part of the normalisation process with Ankara during the late 1980s and early 1990s, as it also preserved the hierarchy of victimhood vis-à-vis the Holocaust and the notion of the latter's uniqueness. As Azerbaijan took a more active part in Armenian genocide denial from the early 1990s in support of Turkey, Israel's MFA found itself in a position of being unofficially committed not only to Turkey, but also to Azerbaijan in its unequivocal support of the denial narrative, bolstering the latter in its opposition to Armenia (see e.g. Abadi 2002: 75–76; Ben Aharon 2018: 470–471). Simultaneously with the above developments, Israel opened an embassy in Baku in 1993 after officially recognising Azerbaijan in December 1991.

Second, one of the core elements of Israeli-Azerbaijani bilateral relations, if not the main one, is the Iranian threat, which both countries view as existential. For Azerbaijan, the fundamentalist Islamic character of post-revolutionary Iran poses a threat to its identity as a secular Muslim nation. While the Jewish state is not threatened by this particular identity factor, Jerusalem and Baku face a mutual threat in the form of Iran's nuclear programme. From the Israeli perspective, post-1979 revolutionary Iran has made it clear that Israel and Zionism are Tehran's worst enemies and should be destroyed.

One of Tehran's means of attempting to thwart Israel is denying the Holocaust and labelling it as a myth, and this provides a backdrop to its threats to eliminate Israel, putting Jerusalem in a position to view Iran's ambitions to obtain a nuclear bomb as an existential threat to its survival. This threat aligns with Iran's challenge to the Shi'ite yet secular identity of the Ilham Aliyev regime. Furthermore, driven by Israel's relations with Azerbaijan – and in keeping with the convention that 'my enemy's enemy shall be my friend' – Iran allied itself with Armenia and supported the latter in the NK conflict. This added a further layer to the existential threat posed to Azerbaijan's national security by Iran.

5.1 ISRAELI-AZERBAIJANI RELATIONS AND THE FIRST NK WAR (1990S)

The opening of an Israeli embassy in Baku in 1993 should also be seen as a larger part of Israel's post-Cold War foreign policy. As noted in the work of Daniel Edelstein and Jacob Abadi, after the 1979 Iranian revolution and for most of the 1980s, Saudi Arabia and Iran tried to spread Islamic fundamentalism around the Muslim countries in the wider Middle East region (Edelstein 2021; Abadi 2002: 66). The Israeli government led by Yitzhak Shamir (1988–1992) was also concerned about the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Yasser Arafat's diplomatic campaign in Central Asia aimed at mobilising support for the Palestinian cause in the post-Soviet majority-Muslim republics (Aras 1998: 69). According to Joel Peters, Rob Geist Pinfold and Tuğçe Ersoy Ceylan, by the early 1990s countries born out of Soviet disintegration such as Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, which were secular but with a Muslim majority, were already turning to Israel for security aid over the intensification of the Iranian Islamist ambitions (Pinfold and Peters 2019: 8–9; Ceylan 2021: 344). Israel seized the opportunity: David Levi, Israel's deputy Foreign Minister (1990–1992) announced in the Knesset that Israel would recognise all former Soviet republics. This diplomatic step was well calculated and underpinned by a number of objectives: (1) to increase Israel's legitimacy with the new post-Soviet majority-Muslim republics; (2) to reduce Arab influence in these countries; (3) to gain additional United Nations votes from these post-Soviet majority-Muslim republics; and (4) to facilitate Jewish immigration from these former Soviet republics to Israel: for example, Azerbaijan's 20,000-strong Jewish community was a key target of this strategy (Edelstein 2021; Abadi 2002: 66).

In this context, Israel's approach to the post-Soviet majority-Muslim republics was built on the notion of the 'Greater Middle East' (see e.g. Aras 1998: 68–69; Bourttman 2006: 47; Mahammadi and Huseynov 2022), that is, increasing the Middle East's influence in an area of the world that is heavily Muslim, but not Arab. This had long been a strategic goal of Israel at that time (see e.g. Bourttman 2006: 47). Another push to support the Israeli-Azerbaijani alliance came from Washington. In the 1990s, the idea was that the Israel-Turkey-Georgia-Azerbaijan alliance, supported by Washington, would be a counterweight to the Syria-Iran-Armenia-Russia coalition (Lindenstrauss 2015: 73). One of the most important factors in Azerbaijan's close ties with Israel was the opportunity for Baku to improve its image abroad and help sell Azerbaijan's policy in Washington. Baku viewed the pro-Israel lobby as a counterweight to the Armenian lobby's influence on American foreign policy (Lindenstrauss 2015: 72–73; Jafarova 2022: 321).

However, for most of the 1990s, Jerusalem played down its relations with Baku. Back in 1991, Azerbaijan had a fragile economy, a politically unstable government, and a weak military (Bourtman 2006: 47). Baku turned to Israel to provide leverage against a much stronger Iran and a militarily superior Armenia. Against the background of the 'one nation, two states' concept binding Turkey and Azerbaijan and the golden era of Israeli-Turkish relations, Jerusalem had every reason to help Azerbaijan's government; indeed, doing so would come across as a tribute to Ankara. The work of Bourtman, Murinson, and Göksel proposes that Jerusalem was committed to improving Azerbaijan's weak economy by developing trade ties in a variety of sectors, such as agriculture, arms, technology, and more (see e.g. Bourtman 2006; Murinson 2008; Göksel 2015: 655–675). In April 1992, the countries agreed to exchange ambassadors, but the Israeli MFA did not seem too enthusiastic about opening an embassy in Baku – an Israeli ambassador in Baku was not a terribly attractive proposition for Israeli diplomats at that time. The first Israeli ambassador in Azerbaijan was Benny Haddad, a 24-year-old IDF veteran who was sent there to promote Jewish immigration to Israel (Abadi 2002: 74–75). According to Soner Cagaptay and Daniel Edelstein, both Turkey and Israel supplied Stinger missiles to Azerbaijani troops during the first NK war (1991–1994) (Cagaptay 2005; Edelstein 2021). After 1994, with the NK conflict simmering at low intensity, Israel maintained 'silent' relations with Baku, while continuing to develop – and strengthen – bilateral ties under the radar. In 1997, the Israeli PM Binyamin Netanyahu (1996–1999) made the first ever visit of an Israeli prime minister to Baku (Lindenstrauss 2015: 70). Israel's securitization of the Iranian nuclear project became a key factor boosting Israel's alliance with Azerbaijan in the late 1990s, with the latter instrumentalised by Netanyahu as being vital to Israel's national security (Lupovici 2014: 413–414).

5.2 ISRAELI-AZERBAIJANI RELATIONS (2000–2020)

During the early 2000s, Israel stepped up its efforts to stop Iran's nuclear activities. Jerusalem invested more and more in developing relations with Baku. As noted in the work of Murinson and Lindenstrauss, Israel built intelligence gathering stations along the border between Azerbaijan and Iran in the 1990s, and Jerusalem began providing unmanned aerial vehicles to Azerbaijan for border monitoring in 2011 (Murinson 2010: 180; Lindenstrauss 2015: 73).

One can also understand why, in light of these significant security threats to Israel and Azerbaijan from the Iranian front, the two countries aligned and cooperated in many sub-sectors like defence industry exports, tourism, and military equipment. Moreover, some further indications about the context and importance of Israel's arms sales to Azerbaijan can be found in the following statement taken from a telegram which was leaked to Wikileaks, entitled 'Azerbaijan's Discreet Symbiosis with Israel'. Article 5. (C) of a classified cable, which is based on diplomatic interactions from 2009 between Azerbaijani and Israeli colleagues in Baku and with Azerbaijani MFA officials, reads:

Through its close relations with Israel, Azerbaijan gets a level of access to the quality weapon systems it needs to develop its army that it cannot obtain from the US and Europe due to various legal limitations, nor from its ex-Soviet suppliers, Belarus and Ukraine. Where other Western nations are reluctant to sell ground combat systems to the Azerbaijanis for fear of

encouraging Azerbaijan to resort to war to regain NK [Nagorno-Karabakh] and the occupied territories, Israel is free to make substantial arms sales and benefits greatly from deals with its well-heeled client (WikiLeaks 2009).⁴

This quote provides valuable empirical evidence for the underpinnings of the covert relationship between Israel and Azerbaijan. Specifically, it shows that the arms sales to Azerbaijan by Israel, as well as the latter's role in the 2020 conflict, amount to a zero-sum game, i.e. the situation is caused by the Western nations' and ex-Soviet suppliers' refusal to sell modern weaponry to Azerbaijan. The more these countries refuse to sell ground combat systems, the more room there is for third-party countries like Israel to fill this vacuum, not only for financial benefit but also in exchange for diplomatic influence, including with respect to the conflict itself. It should also be evident, therefore, that Israel's provision of arms to Azerbaijan gave the country the means with which it could try to retake NK from Armenia in October 2020.

6. ISRAELI-ARMENIAN RELATIONS (1990S)

The relationship between Israel and the Republic of Armenia (hereafter Armenia) should be understood in the context of the analysis of the previous sections. Israel and Armenia established diplomatic relations in April 1992. Yet, the Israeli MFA did not open an embassy in Yerevan and shied away from outing its relations with Armenia (see e.g. Ben Aharon 2019a). The background context of the Armenian genocide denial spearheaded by Turkey, which was thoroughly supported by the Israeli MFA during the 1980s, led to cold relations between Israel and Armenia under President Levon Ter-Petrosyan (1991–1998) (Bishku 2022: 369–372; Ben Aharon 2017: 465–467). Relations failed to warm in the 1990s; indeed, any hypothetical warming would have severely jeopardised Israel's relations with Ankara and Baku, which was not an outcome Israel wanted.

6.1 ISRAELI-ARMENIAN RELATIONS (1990S) IN THE CONTEXT OF GENOCIDE DENIAL

Given the relatively low profile of Israeli-Armenian relations, there is a very thin body of literature, if any at all, on this subject (see the exception to this rule: Bishku 2022: 368–372, 2021: 20–43). Mostly, therefore, the relationship between the countries can be seen through the lens of the Armenian genocide denial narrative, which Israel had helped to perpetrate in international forums and, from 1989, in the Israeli Parliament (Ben Aharon 2017, 2019a, 2019b).

To better grasp this policy as it pertains to Israeli-Armenian relations, one need to be familiar with Jerusalem's position on the matter of genocide recognition over three distinct periods: first, the period 1980–1989, when, after many years of silence, Turkey first began to contend with the 'Armenian question' on the international stage. To that end, as introduced in the section on Israeli-Turkish relations, Ankara created a well-oiled denial machine, for which it also received support from Israel's MFA

4 This WikiLeaks cable was firstly cited in another context concerning Israeli-Azerbaijani relations in the article by Galia Lindenstrauss published in the journal *Strategic Assessment* (2015).

and Jewish organisations in the US and Turkey (see Ben Aharon 2015, 2019; Bali 2012: 15; Baer 2020). Second, the period 1989–2000, when Israel continued to provide international support for the Turkish narrative, but the subject was first put forward for discussion in the Knesset. Throughout this period, despite some pressure from individual Israeli Members of Parliament (MPs), the Knesset largely acquiesced to the foreign ministry's position that this discourse should be kept from the public eye and avoid mentioning the 'G' word (Ben Aharon 2017: 465–467, 2023a).

The third period began in 2001, shortly before Erdoğan first came to power (2002) and continues to the present day (2022). Like the serious diplomatic crisis between The Hague and Ankara in 2017, and between Washington and Ankara in 2019, Israeli-Turkish relations have also been buffeted by several crises since 2008. Examples include Operation 'Cast Lead'⁵ in Gaza in 2008-09, the *Mavi Marmara* incident in 2010, and the relocation of the US embassy to Jerusalem in 2018, all of which sparked harsh exchanges between Ankara and Jerusalem and engendered strident rhetoric on the part of both Erdoğan and Netanyahu.⁶ While some intensified calls to recognise the Armenian genocide were made by MPs to counter Erdoğan's hostility towards Israel and to show Ankara that Israel could also double down on its position, these calls did not mature into an official policy of genocide recognition.

All in all, the first period described above is most critical to our understanding of how Israel's relations with Turkey, and with the Armenian diaspora, were shaped in the 1980s prior to the NK conflict. The second and third periods, meanwhile, are highly relevant to Israel's relations with Turkey, but also with Azerbaijan and Armenia during and after the first NK war. Specifically, while in the 1980s Israel was supporting Turkey's denial of the Armenian genocide mainly in US and Europe, in the second (1990s) and third period (2000s to present day) the setting changed, with Israel supporting Turkey and Azerbaijan (even though the latter was not implicated in the genocide) not just in international fora, but also in Israel's own domestic political arena when an Armenian genocide bill was put forward for discussion in the Knesset. The Armenian diaspora (mostly in Israel, but also in the US, France, and the UK) kept pressuring Israel to recognise the Armenian genocide, while the government in Yerevan kept a low profile on the issue.

There was therefore a gap between the Armenian diaspora and Armenia itself regarding the essence of Armenian genocide recognition and Armenian identity politics (see e.g. Libaridian 1999: 13; DerGhougassian 2014: 198; Tölölyan and Papazian 2014: 83–101; Panossian 2002). As noted in the work of Khatchik DerGhougassian, 'the question of whether and how to include the Armenian Genocide on the state's foreign policy agenda has become the most important issue of controversy between the republic and the global Armenian diaspora' (DerGhougassian 2014: 193). Since Arme-

5 Operation 'Cast Lead' refers to Israeli military operations in the Gaza Strip that lasted from 27 December 2008 to 18 January 2009.

6 The Gaza Flotilla Raid: on 31 May 2010, an Israeli elite commando unit took over the Turkish Flotilla, also known as the *Mavi Marmara*. The organisers of the flotilla planned to break the Israeli blockade surrounding the Gaza Strip and deliver humanitarian aid to the Palestinians. The Israeli elite commando takeover resulted in the death of nine Turkish citizens and activists on board the *Mavi Marmara*, and about sixty activists and ten Israeli soldiers were injured. Turkey responded immediately to the incident and, as it had done before, recalled its ambassador from Tel Aviv.

nia has significant economic incentives to establish diplomatic relations with Ankara and open their shared borders for trade and economic development, Yerevan has insisted on 'relations without pre-conditions' with Ankara (see e.g. Ben Aharon 2020b). 'The Turkish-Armenian agreement [to open the mutual border] seems to illustrate the clash of *raison d'état* (reasons of state) with diaspora activism' (DerGhougassian 2014: 193–207, especially 195).

Armenia's first president, Levon Ter-Petrosian, believed in the principle of 'relations without pre-conditions' with respect to Armenia's position on Turkey after independence in 1991, and tried to normalise bilateral relations between the two states on this basis (Libaridian 1999: 13; DerGhougassian 2014: 198; Tölölyan and Papazian 2014: 83–101; Panossian 2002). Ter-Petrosian followed a line of pragmatic foreign policy aimed at an independent democratic state, a free market economy, and peaceful relations with all neighbours. The exclusion of the 1915 genocide from the Armenian foreign policy agenda is perhaps best explained by the president's chief advisor Gerard J. Libaridian, who argued that there are 'two different worldviews' in Armenian political thinking: 'The first group consists of the pragmatists, people who want to use the opportunity of statehood to return Armenia and Armenians to the fold of humanity as "normal" people. The second group believes statehood should be used as a vehicle to achieve a "higher" purpose, quality, mission, or program' (Libaridian 1999: 13).

DerGhougassian argues that Ter-Petrosian held to the first worldview; in this case, therefore, normalising relations with Turkey gained priority, as 'the opening of the border was seen as both a geopolitical necessity for breaking Armenia's landlocked isolation and dependence on Russia and as an opportunity for economic cooperation, including transborder projects of economic integration' (DerGhougassian 2014: 198). The Armenian-Turkish border was closed by Ankara on 30 April 1993 to put pressure on Yerevan regarding its dispute over NK. The closure blockaded geographically landlocked Armenia, leaving only two tiny lifelines for the Armenian economy: the borders with Georgia and Iran (DerGhougassian 2014: 198). Nevertheless, keeping the issue of genocide recognition off of Armenia's foreign policy agenda deepened the schism between the diaspora and the Ter-Petrosian government. Ter-Petrosian publicly confronted representatives of the diaspora, including highly respected intellectuals who had pioneered the inclusion of the genocide on the international agenda (*ibid.*). This dispute between Ter-Petrosian and the diaspora peaked during the commemoration of the 80th anniversary of the Armenian genocide in 1995. Ter-Petrosian and Libaridian publicly criticised Armenian professor Richard Hovannisian, declaring that the 1915 genocide 'was a historical issue, not a political one' (*ibid.*: 206).

In the 1980s, prior to Armenia's establishment as a nation, it was the Armenian diaspora that initiated the question of the 1915 genocide and instigated a campaign for official recognition. Israel's choice to support Turkey's narrative as opposed to that of the Armenian diaspora was quite understandable, as the latter could not offer Israel any meaningful motivation to support its campaign. On the contrary, Israel gained much more from leveraging the denial campaign by Turkey. When Armenia became an official state, whose government did not align with the views of the diaspora on the importance of genocide recognition, the resulting diaspora-homeland schism made it easy for Israel to stick to its position, as the Republic of Armenia's official policy tacitly gave Israel the green light to continue in opposition to the Armenian diaspora without directly antagonising the Armenian government.

6.2 ISRAELI-ARMENIAN RELATIONS (2000S)

The Israeli MFA and the Knesset have consistently supported the Turkish and Azerbaijani denial of the Armenian genocide. However, former Israeli minister of education, Yossi Sarid (1999–2000) is one Israeli politician who *has* recognized the Armenian genocide. Sarid had been an active supporter of the Armenian community's campaign for recognition of the genocide for two decades prior to his 1999 appointment as minister of education. On 24 April 2000, as Israeli minister of education, he caused a diplomatic scandal with his participation in the 85th Armenian genocide commemoration ceremony at the Armenian Church in the Old City of Jerusalem. In his speech, warmly supporting the Armenian community, he unequivocally broke ranks with government's line, stating:

I join you, members of the Armenian community on your Memorial Day as you mark the 85th anniversary of your genocide. I am here with you as a human being, as a Jew, as an Israeli, and as Minister of Education of the State of Israel. (Sarid 2000; Ben Aharon 2018: 466; Auron 2003: 185–199)

Needless to say, three days after Sarid's speech, the Turkish government asked that the Israeli government clarify its policy on the issue. They considered the incident a hard blow, and an unexpected one. This issue would arise time and time again in bilateral Israeli-Armenian relations and in Israel's local political arena. For example, in 2003, Israel's ambassador to Georgia Rivka Cohen, who served as her country's envoy to Armenia from 2001 to 2005, made a distinction between the Holocaust and the Armenian 'tragedy' at a press conference in Yerevan; Cohen asserted that the Holocaust was 'a unique phenomenon, since it had always been planned and aimed to destroy a whole nation' (Fisk 2007: 326; Bishku 2022: 369). The Israeli government was challenged by Yerevan, arguing that the statement by Cohen had the appearance of either rejecting or belittling the Armenian genocide. Israel responded that it had never tried to deny or diminish the reality of events, nor the great suffering undergone by the Armenian people. This sensitive subject, however, they continued, required a public discussion and dialogue between historians based on documents and facts (Bishku 2022: 369).

From a public diplomacy perspective, Israel ostensibly tried to remain neutral in the NK conflict; for example, in a vote in the United Nations General Assembly on 14 March 2008, on resolution G A/10693 reaffirming the territorial integrity Azerbaijan and demanding the withdrawal of all Armenian forces, which was passed 39 to 7, Israel was among the 100 members to abstain from voting (Bishku 2009: 304).

The Armenians made numerous attempts to convince Israel to exchange ambassadors and to open an embassy in Yerevan. Yet from Jerusalem's point of view, opening an embassy would make a statement in the wrong direction for Baku and Ankara. Armenia had also been trying to open an embassy in Tel Aviv since 2002, but was only able to do so in the summer of 2020 (see e.g. Ben Aharon 2020b; Melman 2019). Indeed, this act seemed to mark a new period in which bilateral relations could improve, so that when the Armenians announced the grand opening in 2019, Israel formally encouraged it, noting that '[t]he opening of the embassy is a new and important chapter in bilateral relations and we are confident that this will further strengthen the friendship between the two peoples and

enhance cooperation between the states in all areas' (Ahren 2019). Israel, for its part, had nothing to lose in such a situation. Considering that it was not a mutual step, Jerusalem could always argue that the Armenians received nothing in return, in particular no recognition of the Armenian genocide. The Armenian gesture was useful PR for Israel's government, showing that Israel was an emerging power with expanding normalised diplomatic relations under the Netanyahu administration: that Israel had a strong and independent foreign policy and could conduct diplomatic relations with whomever it wishes, including Baku's greatest enemy.

However, when the last round of violence in NK began in late September 2020, Armenia recalled its ambassador from Tel Aviv for consultations just two weeks after it had officially opened, due to evidence showing that Israel continued to arm Azerbaijan during the ongoing conflict. The Armenian policy of 'relations without preconditions' has been interpreted by Jerusalem as a sign of weakness, driving Jerusalem to its zero-effort policy with Yerevan, while doubling its arms deals with Azerbaijan. Yerevan does not offer a sufficiently convincing strategic advantage for Jerusalem to reconfigure its alliances in the region. In short: Armenia wants Israel more than Israel wants Armenia. Even if the 2020 conflict in NK dissipates into a longer-term ceasefire, there is no obvious breakthrough in sight for equitable relations between Israel and Armenia.

7. OUTLOOK: BETWEEN GEOPOLITICS AND IDENTITY STRUGGLE

This report shows how both geopolitical factors and identity struggles come into play and interlink in the puzzle of why Israel supports Azerbaijan. The conflict dynamics in NK clearly illustrate the intense involvement of Israel, Turkey, and Iran. This paper has demonstrated the importance of 'critical geopolitical analysis' by framing the NK wars as a conflict that also encompasses identity politics, diaspora-homeland schisms, genocide denial and recognition, and questions of culture that go beyond the geography of NK.

The 1980s, late-Cold War heritage of Israel's relations with both Iran and Turkey put Jerusalem in a prime position to support Azerbaijan during the NK conflict in 1988. This support developed and emerged as one of Israel's most important alliances in the Middle East and North Africa. Moreover, despite changing alliances and tension between Israel and Turkey in 2010–2013, and tension between Azerbaijan and Turkey in 2009, the fundamental geopolitical puzzle pieces remain unchanged in NK: Israel supports Azerbaijan together with Turkey; by contrast, Iran and Russia support Armenia. A further discussion about the deep involvement of Iran and Turkey in the NK conflict is beyond the scope of this report; however, such a study would certainly reveal the further interests that exist in steering the NK conflict towards non-resolution, as both Tehran and Ankara benefit from the tensions between Azerbaijan and Armenia and would continue to do so in future escalations.

Thus, as this report has shown, Israel's involvement in NK is part of a larger geopolitical puzzle; both Israel and Turkey have been using this conflict: not only as a 'laboratory' to examine the quality of their arms, but also to engage with Iran's aggressive ambitions in the region and to use NK as a 'security buffer'. The arms Israel exported to the NK conflict during the 44 days of the war in 2020

left little doubt that Jerusalem seeks to support Azerbaijan in NK as a proxy war zone against Iran's aggressiveness in the region that combines Holocaust denial, nuclear threats, and statements about the destruction of Israel and Zionism.

Based on this notion, and especially given the results of the latest elections in Israel (1 November 2022) with Netanyahu's victory and the re-election of his administration, it is likely that we will hear and see even more of Israel's presence in the South Caucasus, more pressure on Iran, and even higher degrees of support offered by Israel to Azerbaijan. To recall, Netanyahu pushed for further measures against Iran's nuclear project during his second administration between 2009 and 2013, when Tehran's Holocaust denial and threats to exterminate Israel reached something of a climax (Lupovici 2016: 413–432). As Russia, Armenia's largest ally in the region, is becoming increasingly bogged down in its invasion of Ukraine, and investing more and more of its thin resources in this war, it is more likely that the post-2020 trend will continue, and that Armenia will subscribe to the ceasefire borders established in late October 2020.

Ultimately, since October 2020, the loser of the geopolitical puzzle has been Armenia, and it is likely to be locked in this position for the time being. Between 1994 and 2020, during its occupation of NK, Armenia was in a much better position – yet still it had not obtained recognition of the 1915 Armenian genocide from Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Israel. However, non-recognition of the genocide was something Yerevan – if not the Armenian diaspora – could somehow deal with, and it did align well with the 'relations without conditions' policy (Libaridian 1999: 13; DerGhougassian 2014: 198; Tölölyan and Papazian 2014: 83–101; Panossian 2002).

However, with the loss of the NK region to Azerbaijan in October 2020, Armenia lost on all fronts, including in the schism with the diaspora on the subject of genocide recognition. Since the early 1990s, Israel's alliance with Baku has also served as a justification for Israel's support of Turkey's Armenian genocide denial narrative and this, in turn, promotes Israel's position on the 'uniqueness' of the Holocaust in the hierarchy of victimhood (Bauer 2001; Moses 2021: 395–477; Ben Aharon 2019c: 349, 2018: 459–476). In conclusion, as long as the pieces of this firm geopolitical puzzle remain in play – particularly Iran and Israel's mutual hostility – Jerusalem will maintain its high-profile support, training, and supply of arms to Azerbaijan.

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ACRONYMS

AKP	Justice and Development Party
ASALA	Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia
EU	European Union
IDF	Israel Defense Forces
JCAG	Justice Commandos of the Armenian Genocide
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MIT	Turkish National Intelligence Organization
MP	Member of Parliament
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NK	Nagorno-Karabakh
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organization
PM	Prime Minister
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
UN	United Nations
US	United States
USHMM	United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

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ELDAD BEN AHARON //

BETWEEN GEOPOLITICS AND IDENTITY
STRUGGLE:
WHY ISRAEL TOOK SIDES WITH AZERBAIJAN
IN THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT

In the second Nagorno-Karabakh war in 2020, Azerbaijan achieved a decisive victory over Armenia. Quite surprisingly, Israel was a key player in this conflict, providing Azerbaijan with extensive support in the form of technology and arms. This support is part of a bigger research puzzle: How can Israel's involvement in this conflict be explained? This report offers an explanation by showing how both geopolitical factors and identity struggle are intertwined. Using the lens of critical geopolitical analysis, the report argues that not only realist factors, but also social constructions of security as well as national and cultural identity play into Israel's interest in the region.

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