

AZERBAIJAN-ISRAELI RELATIONS: SINCERE FRIENDSHIP OF PEOPLES AND STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP OF COUNTRIES

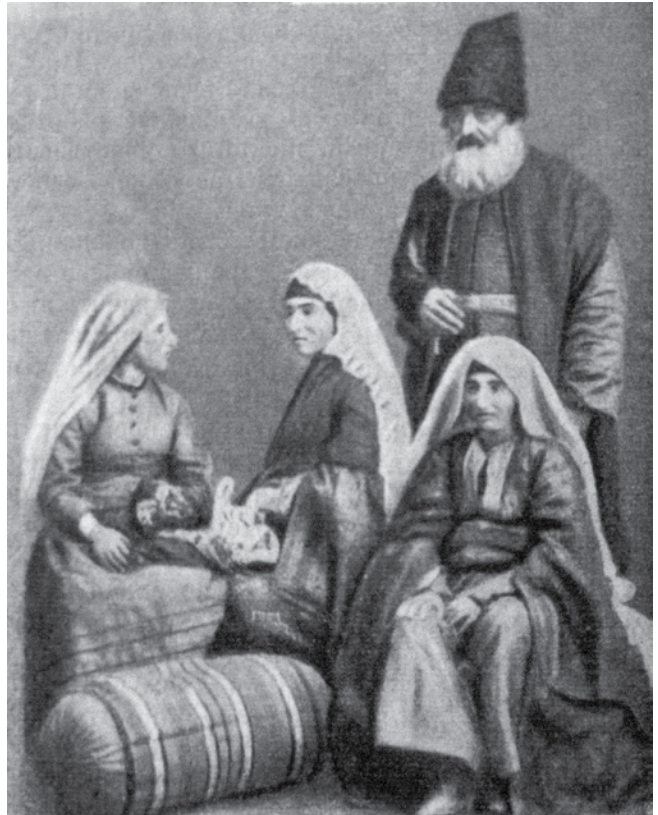
*Mountain-Jewish Family
End of the XIX Century*

Over the last twenty-seven years, the relationships between Israel and Azerbaijan have improved critically and drastically. It is historical fact that no country in Eurasia has closer or warmer ties with Israel than Azerbaijan. The relationship between the two countries is particularly surprising because Azerbaijan is a majority-Muslim country.

In the development and strengthening of relations between countries, political and economic interests play a special role. I am more than confident that human relations, a human bridge between the Azerbaijani and Jewish people, play a special and vital role in the relations between Israel and Azerbaijan. We can look at the recent history of these relations and actually see the reflection in today's reality.

Dr. Yevsey Gindes, Minister of Health of Azerbaijan Democratic Republic

Relatively few people outside the Azerbaijani or



Heder in Guba. 1920 year

Jewish communities know about the remarkable role that the Jewish community has played in Azerbaijan. The first health minister of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic of 1918-20 was Jewish, and there were representatives of Jewish groups in parliament. In addition, during the existence of the Republic from 1918 to 1920, Jewish communities published a Caucasian Jewish Bulletin, the Palestine newspaper and a biweekly magazine, Youth of Zion. Moreover, throughout the Soviet period, Jews played a major role in the intellectual, economic and political life of Azerbaijan.

Unlike many cultures, Azerbaijanis have never viewed Jews as foreign or alien. Israelis with roots in Azerbaijan many years are doing a great deal to foster the emerging economic and even geopolitical cooperation between Azerbaijan and Israel. The Jewish people have lived in the territory of Azerbaijan for over 2600 years and have never experienced harassment, insults, pogroms and anti-Semitic actions.

Outstanding children's doctor, Health Minister of Azerbaijan in the 1918-1920 years Dr. Yevsey Gindes





President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev and 9th Israeli President Shimon Peres

It is necessary to point out the words of 9th Israeli President Shimon Peres, during his historical visit to Azerbaijan: "I know that the policy of Azerbaijan is of peace, friendship, development but also of independence. With your unique geographic location, there is no doubt that you already are, and will continue to be, a key country in this part of the world."

Today it is not secret that Israel has always been attracted to Azerbaijan, not only because there is no anti-Semitism in that country. At the same time, Baku has repeatedly denounced manifestations of anti-Semitism elsewhere and Azerbaijan today is center and wonderful multiculturalism sample for the world. The multiculturalism and tolerance historically inherent in the life of Azerbaijanis today became an integral feature of everyday life of each citizen of the Azerbaijani state, irrespective of national identity, language and religion. Azerbaijan, a predominantly Shiite Muslim country, is also home to several other ethnic and religious groups, including ancient Zoroastrian, Christian, and Jewish communities. Respect and tolerance for national minorities has played a vital role in the development of the country from antiquity to the days of the Silk Road to modernity. Azerbaijan has for millennia been a safe haven for a wide array of diverse peoples fleeing persecution and oppression, perhaps most notably, the Jews. Today, the close bilateral relations of Israel and Azerbaijan—owing much to the hundreds of thousands of Jewish Azerbaijanis who left during the dissolution of the Soviet Union, only to return to a free and prosperous Azerbaijan—provide an interreligious, geopolitical, and cultural map for how Jews and Muslims can and do act toward one another and how they can and do coexist.

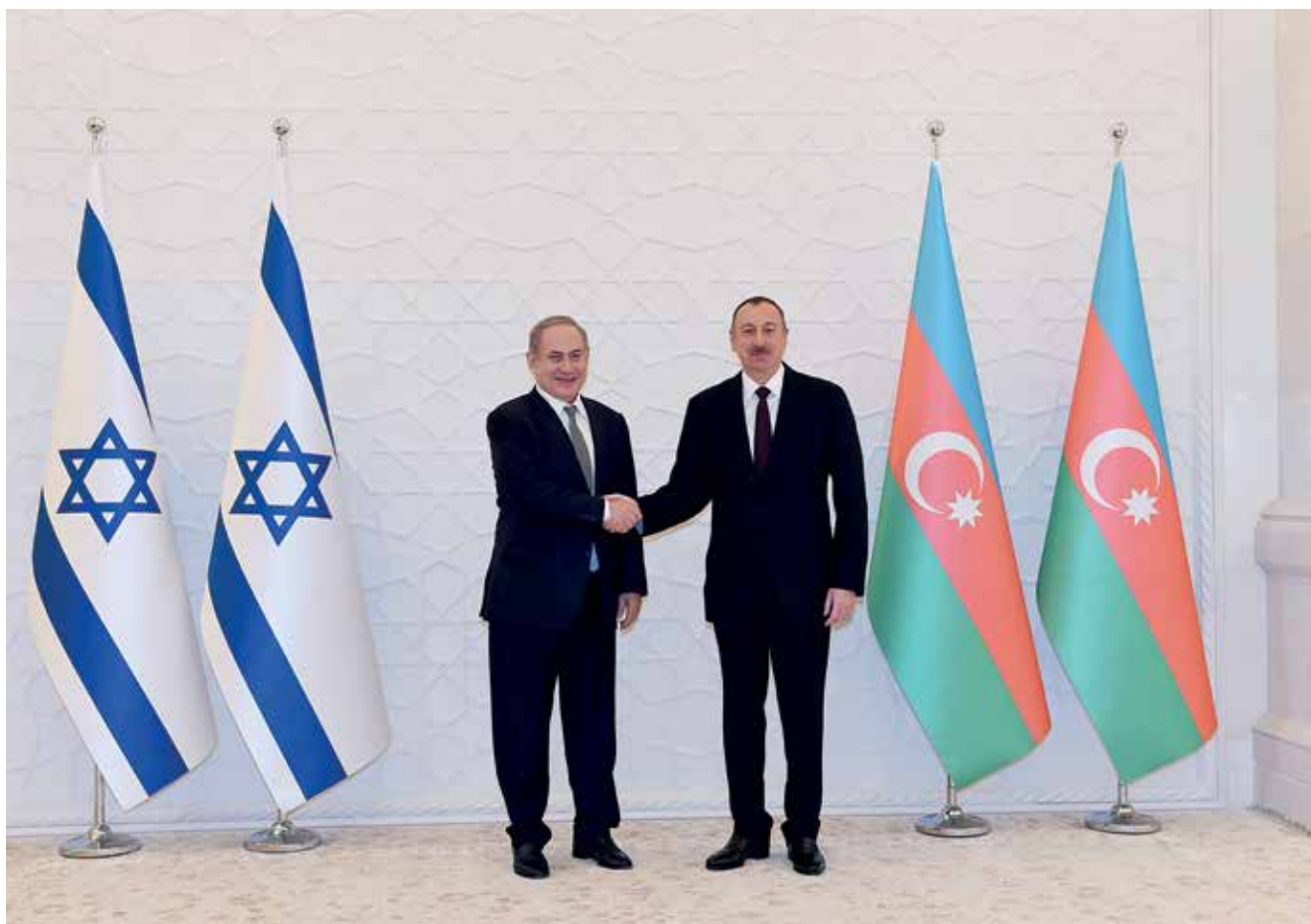
The historical visit of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to Jewish school in Baku

Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev also celebrated the strength of the relationship between the two countries by using these words: "For centuries, Azerbaijan and Jewish peoples have lived in peace and this friendship and brother relations continues to exist between our countries. The Jewish community in Azerbaijan actively helps to strengthen our bilateral relations. In Azerbaijan, there are seven synagogues, five of which are located in the capital Baku and there are Jewish schools in the area. In recent years the relationship between Azerbaijan and Israel produced many advantages for both countries".

On the one hand, the military agreements signed between the two countries, worth about five billion dollars, granted Azerbaijan with better technology and an ally to the northern border with Iran. An aggressive Armenia, which continues to occupy 20% of Azerbaijan lands, is interested in Azerbaijan turning off cooperation with State of Israel on security issues and struggle against terrorist threat. Israel is very important for Azerbaijan, not only an economic, political, but also a strategic partner for security issues and geopolitical and military partnership.

Despite the fact that official Baku has not yet opened its diplomatic mission in Israel, the Azerbaijani government permanently sends numerous official delegations to Israel and, in turn, receives even more Israeli guests in Baku. This is especially true and revealing, given the sharp and continuing expansion of economic ties with Israel, given the purchase of Azerbaijani oil and Israeli investments in the Azerbaijani economy and agriculture. In turn, Azerbaijan needs modern high technologies in agriculture, military industry, telecommunications, and this list can be continued. At the same time, countries promote educational, humanitarian and cultural projects.

The visit of the Israeli Prime Minister to Azerbaijan on December 8, 2016 was super historic. Despite the fact that Benjamin Netanyahu was in Baku in August 1997, this visit was the first official visit of the head of the Israeli government to Azerbaijan for the 25-year history of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Israel and Azerbaijan. This meeting between Prime Minister of Israel and Azerbaijan President in Baku once again confirmed that the political dialogue between the two countries is at the highest level, while the economic component and trade turnover are constantly growing. Azerbaijan-Israel cooperation and partnership are flourishing; trade turnover between the countries is almost 3.5 billion dollars.



If earlier this turnover was focused on the oil and gas industry, currently the development of this relationship is diversifying, covering other sectors of the economy.

Military-technical partnership between Israel and Azerbaijan is actively and permanently developing and strengthening. In recent time, some Israeli media, with the help of some representatives of the Armenian lobby in Israel, are trying to spread false information about the “problems” in Israeli-Azerbaijani military cooperation. After the April events of 2016 - during a rapid counter-offensive, the Armenian side’s front defense line was broken in multiple places and Azerbaijan army has re-took several strategic heights and inhabited places. We actually have seen anti-Israeli hysteria and antisemitism in Armenia, even in Israel the Armenian community held rallies against the Azerbaijani-Israeli partnership.

Concerning the criticism of Armenia on Israeli-Azerbaijan military cooperation, it necessary to emphasize that Azerbaijan and Israel themselves choose their friends and partners, and these countries themselves determine the level of strategic cooperation and partnership in the military-technical field. Moreover, no

one has the right to interfere with it. Azerbaijan does not ask that there are military bases of the third state – Russian Federation on the territory of Armenia and what military assistance this country provides and will provide to the Republic of Armenia, which occupied 20% of Azerbaijan territories. It is absolutely absurd and senseless when a country that has been occupying the territory of Azerbaijan for more than 25 years accuses official Baku in violating the norms of international law. Armenia started its undeclared war, with the goal of extending Armenian territory to the greatest degree possible at the expense of Azerbaijan.

At the beginning of 1992, Armenia began using Russian military and material assistance to intensify its occupation, starting with settlements in Nagorno-Karabakh. The worst atrocity took place on February 26, 1992, when Armenian forces perpetrated a genocidal massacre against Azerbaijani civilians in the town of Khojaly. The bloody massacre that transpired in the small Azerbaijani town of Khojaly was also a crime against humanity. Armenian armed forces, like the Nazis before them, committed unspeakable atrocities and barbaric



acts. 613 people were killed, 487 people were crippled, and 1,275 civilians — men, women, children and the elderly — were captured, murdered, raped and tortured in manners reminiscent of the Nazis. Most notably, the mass extermination of the civilian population of Khojaly was carried out for one reason — all were Azerbaijanis. International journalists and an official Azerbaijani investigation reported disfigured corpses, dead women and children, and the murder of fleeing civilians.

Unlike in the aftermath of World War II, the Nuremberg Trials, and the ongoing hunt for Nazis, the perpetrators of the extermination of Khojaly live freely in the modern-day Republic of Armenia. Many, even today, occupy high-level positions in government — former defense minister Seyran Ohanyan, former Armenian president Serzh Sargsyan and former Armenian President Robert Kocharyan, to name a few of the notables. Each participated in atrocities and like the Nazis, they must be brought before an international court to answer for their crimes. Like the Nazis, copious records exist attesting to

their involvement and complicity. Unlike the Nazis, who were personally secretive about their crimes, several of these men gave interviews to the media lauding their criminal acts. Their reign, too, will end, as the Nazis did and as Armenia grows out of its warring infancy.

The Defense Minister of Israel Avigdor Lieberman is one of the architects of the Azerbaijani-Israeli strategic partnership

The State of Israel supports the fair position of Azerbaijan - it actively supports the territorial integrity of the country and calls for resolving the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict within the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. For more than 25 years, the occupation of Azerbaijani territories by Armenia has continued. As a result of this aggression, there are 1 million refugees in the country. In this complex geopolitical situation, support for Azerbaijan's fair position on the part of such an important strategic partner and strong geopolitical actor in the Middle East as the State of Israel is very necessary and very important for the Republic of Azerbaijan

Exams on Mountain Jewish language. Baku, Mountain-Jewish school, 1946



Other than military, the relations between the two countries also concern the energy, medical, agricultural and technological sector. Today Israel represents the second importer after Italy of Azeri oil; 40% of oil imported from Israel, corresponding to about 30 million barrels a year, comes from Azerbaijan via the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan. More over Israel participates to the economic diversification efforts promoted by the Azerbaijani government to reduce the vulnerability of oil market.

“We obviously have a strong energy relationship,” Netanyahu said in an interview with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev. “We are talking not only about the sale of oil from Azerbaijan to Israel, which is a very important part of our oil imports, we are talking about the use of common facilities for exporting gas and gas, Interconnection of Israel’s gas exports potentially to a large gas pipeline that is being built as we are now talking about Azerbaijan in Turkey”. Prime Minister Netanyahu referred to a plan to export Israeli gas via Turkey to European markets, using The Trans-Anatolian (TANAP) and Trans-Adriatic (TAP) pipelines run by Azerbaijan.

The «Zahmatkesh» newspaper which published for the Mountain Jews of Azerbaijan in 1928-1938

As an Israeli citizen, I can say proudly that the leadership of Azerbaijan shows a great degree of deference and partnership to the Jewish community. Under the patronage of President Ilham Aliyev two synagogues





Guests from World Jewish Congress headed by Amb. Ronald Lauder at the six-domed synagogue in Guba

and the largest Jewish educational center in the South Caucasus have been built. Plans are in place for the first Azerbaijani Jewish museum, which will be the first Jewish museum in the South Caucasus.

If one wonders how the majority Muslim country of Azerbaijan came to such a rich alliance with Israel today, one need look no further than the Red Village, a tiny river conclave in the mountainous region of Quba. There, for centuries, a Jewish community has thrived amid a Muslim population. The ancient town of 'Krasnaya Sloboda' (Quba) in northern Azerbaijan, said to be the only all-Jewish town outside of Israel, is the pride of Azerbaijan.

President of World Jewish Congress Ronald Lauder visited to Krasnaya Sloboda village in Azerbaijan on September 2016.

During historical visit of World Jewish Congress Ambassador Ron Lauder to Azerbaijan I had honor to ask him about his impressions of the Jewish community in Azerbaijan. Ronald Lauder pointed out that it was very interesting to be acquainted with the Jewish identity and Jewish way of life in Azerbaijan. "I know that during the Holocaust, Azerbaijan became one of the few havens for the European Ashkenazi Jews who saved their lives and the lives of their children from the Nazis. The

Yeshiva building in the Jewish Slobida village of the Guba district of Azerbaijan



notion of “Mountain Jews” once seemed very abstract to me. I have heard a lot about them, but I have never seen their settlements. However, in Azerbaijan’s Guba district, I saw a warm and friendly attitude of the Azerbaijani people and leadership towards the Mountain Jews. I visited a beautiful synagogue in Krasnaya Sloboda and was very inspired to see a large number of people who met our delegation and me

Honestly, I did not expect to see a powerful Jewish community in a Muslim country with a Shiite majority. There are no such precedents in the world. I think that the Krasnaya Sloboda is a great role model for other countries. Azerbaijan can be proud of its achievements in the area of multiculturalism. As a President of the World Jewish Congress, I highly appreciate the respectful and warm attitude of the Azerbaijani people and the Azerbaijani leadership towards the Jewish community and I want to express my sincere gratitude to the President of Azerbaijan,” – said me Ronald Lauder during his visit to Azerbaijan

In this region, Jewish and Muslim Azerbaijanis have been living harmoniously for centuries. Despite Armenia’s ethnic cleansing and aggression toward Azerbaijan, which includes occupation of 20% of its territories and one million refugees and internally displaced people, Azerbaijan is a true model of inter-civilizational and interfaith dia-



logue. Tolerance and multiculturalism are key foundations of the Azerbaijani society. Azerbaijan has made a concerted effort to create and foster the necessary political and social conditions for developing and strengthening the country’s traditions of multiculturalism and tolerance.

Time and again Azerbaijan has demonstrated that harmony is possible and issues can be resolved without resorting to violence or strife. It is important to emphasize that President Ilham Aliyev has earned the respect of much of both Israeli society and the Jewish community in other countries of the world for his commitment to secularism, multiculturalism and tolerance, for respectful attitude to all religions and peoples living in Azerbaijan. ♦