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# PROACTIVE POLICY IN A VOLATILE REGION: AZERBAIJAN'S MIDDLE EAST STRATEGY

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# PROACTIVE POLICY IN A VOLATILE REGION: AZERBAIJAN'S MIDDLE EAST STRATEGY

## Introduction

In geopolitics, the term “shatterbelt” refers to geographic zones that occupy a strategically important position on the political map and are characterized by intense competition among great powers for influence.<sup>1</sup> One of the clearest examples of such a zone is the Middle East. Located at the crossroads of different cultures, religions, and trade routes, and rich in strategic energy resources, the region has historically been at the center of many conflicts and wars. Today, the strategic importance of the Middle East continues to make it one of the major fault lines among regional and global actors. As John Obert Voll notes, the Middle East is an essential part of the global network of relationships in the modern era.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, developments in this region exert significant influence on processes unfolding at the global level.

Even today, the Middle East is experiencing profound geopolitical turbulence. The Israel-Hamas war, the disruptive activities of the Houthis in Yemen, the 12-day war between Iran and Israel, the prolonged transition period in Syria following the regime change, the clashes between Hezbollah and Israel in Lebanon, and the strained dynamics in Israel-Türkiye relations all pose serious obstacles to ensuring security and lasting peace in the region. The causes of tensions in the region include the difficulty of reconciling diverse cultures and religions, the clash of interests among regional and global actors competing for influence, and internal instability within certain Middle Eastern states and so on.

In its broad definition, the Middle East includes North Africa, the South Caucasus, and parts of South Asia. Situated in the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan is frequently included in analyses of the Middle East due to its historical, cultural, religious, and economic ties with the region. From the moment Azerbaijan restored its independence in 1991, it has pursued a consistent line of developing close relations with Middle Eastern states. Today, Azerbaijan conducts a more proactive policy in the Middle East than in previous periods and is steadily increasing its influence across the region.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10816-021-09520-y>

<sup>2</sup> John Obert Voll, *Islam: Continuity and Change in the Modern World*, 2nd ed. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994).

## Prerequisites shaping Azerbaijan's Influence in the Middle East

The key prerequisites that shape Azerbaijan's influence in the Middle East region can be characterized as follows:

**1. Historical and Cultural Foundations** - As noted earlier, Azerbaijan is not a new actor in the region. Its ties with the Middle East rest on: A) Shared cultural and religious heritage; B) Centuries-long trade relations; C) Intertwined histories. In the Middle East region, values carry profound significance and sensitivity. As Alexander Wendt, one of the leading theorists of social constructivism, argues, shared norms, ideas, and values constitute key factors shaping state behavior and interstate interactions.<sup>3</sup> In this context, Azerbaijan's religious, cultural, and in some cases ethnic links with certain regional states provide an additional advantage in developing relations with them. These deep-rooted connections serve as a natural foundation for Azerbaijan's cooperation with Türkiye, Iran, Syria, Iraq, the Gulf states, and the broader Arab world.

**2. Strategic Geopolitical Position** - Located at the crossroads of the North-South and East-West trade routes, Azerbaijan occupies a unique geopolitical position on the world map. Situated in the region where Europe, Central Asia, and the Middle East converge, Azerbaijan has the potential to serve as a bridge between three continents - Europe, Asia, and Africa. Today, Azerbaijan is rapidly becoming the energy and transport hub of the South Caucasus, which reflects the region's growing importance for Central Asia, Europe, China, and the Middle East.

**3. The End of the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict** - Following the 2020 Second Karabakh War and the 2023 anti-terror operations, Azerbaijan restored its territorial integrity and sovereignty, ending decades of occupation and separatism. The post-war period created new geopolitical realities in the South Caucasus and opened a window of opportunity for peace with Armenia. The peace process between the two countries is ongoing, and the peace declaration signed on 8 August in Washington with U.S. mediation can be considered a significant step in this direction.<sup>4</sup> Ending a 30-year conflict has enabled a recalibration of Azerbaijan's foreign policy. Freed from the need to devote its primary diplomatic focus to conflict resolution, Azerbaijan is now able to strengthen its engagement across different regions. As a result, Azerbaijan today is pursuing a more proactive policy in the Far East, Latin America, Africa, and especially the Middle East.

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<sup>3</sup>Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992): 391–425.

<sup>4</sup> <https://president.az/en/articles/view/69572>

## Key Foreign Policy Instruments Employed by Azerbaijan

In recent years, Azerbaijan has pursued a more proactive foreign policy in the Middle East. The main instruments guiding its engagement in the region can be summarized as follows:

**1. Pragmatic, Balanced, and Multi-Vector Foreign Policy** - For countries located in strategically important regions that attract the attention of great powers, such as Azerbaijan, a balanced policy is generally more effective than adopting John Mearsheimer's strategies of balancing or bandwagoning.<sup>5</sup> Through such a policy, Azerbaijan maintains equidistance from all major powers, developing pragmatic, mutually beneficial relations in different directions, thereby safeguarding its national interests. Similarly, in a geopolitically sensitive region like the Middle East, a balanced approach allows Azerbaijan to cultivate relationships with all key actors. This policy not only projects neutrality but also provides opportunities to establish productive engagements with a wide range of regional stakeholders.

**2. Participation in Regional Political Processes** - Having resolved the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, one of the South Caucasus' most complex political "Gordian knots", Azerbaijan has increased its involvement not only in Caucasian affairs but also in broader regional and global security matters. In this context, Azerbaijan's active participation in bilateral and multilateral diplomatic engagements with Middle Eastern countries, including within the frameworks of the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, has strengthened regional trust and garnered support for the country. For instance, President Ilham Aliyev's attendance on 13 October at the Gaza Peace Summit in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt alongside leaders from the U.S., Türkiye, France, Egypt, and 20 other states can be seen as a reflection of the high level of confidence placed in Azerbaijan by the U.S., which proposed the peace plan, the European Union, and Middle Eastern states.<sup>6</sup>

**3. Economic and Humanitarian Engagement** - Azerbaijan's economic relations, trade, and investment across various sectors with multiple Middle Eastern countries constitute key factors bringing the country closer to the region. Equally important is Azerbaijan's active participation in humanitarian efforts. It has repeatedly provided humanitarian assistance to Palestine and Gaza and was among the first countries to send aid to Syria in December of last year. In addition, Azerbaijan has, at various times, provided humanitarian support to Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen, and in 2023 extended aid to Türkiye following the devastating earthquake.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 35–60.

<sup>6</sup> <https://president.az/en/articles/view/70320>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkiye/azerbaijan-sends-another-batch-of-humanitarian-aid-to-quake-hit-turkiye-/2822087>

**4. Mediation** - As a country committed to regional stability, Azerbaijan has consistently sought to foster positive relations among its partners. To prevent misunderstandings and potential conflicts, it facilitated deconfliction negotiations in 2025, hosting talks between Türkiye and Israel, as well as between Israel and Syria.<sup>8</sup> These discussions yielded tangible outcomes, including an agreement between Türkiye and Israel to establish mechanisms for coordinating actions to prevent military clashes in Syria.<sup>9</sup>

**5. Building a Multicultural Identity** - Both the South Caucasus and the Middle East are situated at the crossroads of multiple cultures and religions. While Samuel Huntington in *The Clash of Civilizations* considers such regions as potential flashpoints for civilizational conflict,<sup>10</sup> Azerbaijan has pursued a different narrative. Historically, it has been a country where diverse peoples and religious communities coexist in peace and harmony. Promoting the idea of “unity in diversity,” Azerbaijan has leveraged its multicultural identity in foreign policy. Initiatives such as the “Baku Process,” launched in 2008, and the biennial “Baku World Forum on Intercultural Dialogue” have reinforced Azerbaijan’s role as a bridge among different religions and cultures.<sup>11</sup> Promoting religious tolerance and intercultural dialogue has become a leading line of Azerbaijan’s foreign policy toward the Middle East. Against the backdrop of the region’s rich religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity, Baku’s multicultural approach has played a key role in developing relationships with various regional actors.

### **Areas of Azerbaijan’s Cooperation with Middle Eastern States**

Beyond traditional trade relations, Azerbaijan cooperates with Middle Eastern countries in the fields of energy, transportation, and security. Today, Azerbaijan serves as a major energy hub, delivering oil and gas from its portion of the Caspian Sea to global markets and facilitating the transit of energy products from Central Asia. Currently, Azerbaijan exports natural gas to 14 countries, including 10 in Europe, 8 of which are members of the European Union. As of 2 August 2025, Azerbaijan began exporting gas to Syria via Türkiye, underscoring the growing significance of the energy factor in Baku’s Middle East policy.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> <https://turkishminute.com/2025/04/10/azerbaijan-hosts-turkey-israel-talks-to-ease-syria-tensions/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://anews.az/en/read/478752>

<sup>10</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 174–177.

<sup>11</sup> <https://bakuprocess.az/baku-process>

<sup>12</sup> <https://anews.az/en/ekonomika/485507/azerbaijan-to-begin-gas-exports-to-syria-via-turkey-on-august-2/>

Meanwhile, Azerbaijan's role as a logistics and transport hub continues to grow, making it a crucial node in corridors such as the Middle Corridor and the North-South Corridor. This strengthens Baku's ability to influence the transportation and communications map of the Middle East. In this regard, the Zangezur or TRIPP corridor, which will connect Azerbaijan to its exclave Nakhchivan and to Türkiye via Armenia as stipulated in the Washington peace declaration signed on 8 August, is of particular significance.<sup>13</sup> This corridor has the potential to serve as the backbone of a new transport route connecting Azerbaijan to Türkiye and onward to Europe, while also providing alternative links to Syria, Iraq, and other Middle Eastern countries via Türkiye. Similarly, the North-South Corridor passing through Azerbaijan offers an alternative route connecting Baku to the Middle East via Iran.

One of the leading areas of Azerbaijan's cooperation with Middle Eastern countries is security. The Middle East, with its highly volatile security architecture, has long suffered from wars, ethnic and religious conflicts, terrorism, and extremism. For this reason, Azerbaijan has engaged in close cooperation with regional states on counterterrorism, border security, regional stability, and related matters. In this context, regional partners can also benefit from Azerbaijan's post-conflict experience in reconstruction, demining, and combating hybrid warfare.

### **A Brief Overview of Azerbaijan's Current Relations with Middle Eastern States**

**1. Türkiye** - As one of the leading actors in the Middle East, Türkiye is Azerbaijan's closest ally and partner. The relationship between the two countries is founded on the concept of "One nation, two states." Beyond shared ethnic, cultural, religious, and historical values, Azerbaijan and Türkiye maintain deep strategic cooperation in the fields of economy, energy, transportation, security, and defense. It's worth noting that major geoeconomic projects connecting the South Caucasus to Europe and global markets such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, the Southern Gas Corridor, and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway begin in Azerbaijan and pass through Georgia to Türkiye. Since gaining independence in 1991, Azerbaijan has developed a dynamic and close relationship with Türkiye, which was elevated to the level of strategic alliance with the Shusha Declaration signed in June 2021.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, as leading members of the Organization of Turkic States, Azerbaijan and Türkiye support each other across various regional and international platforms.

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<sup>13</sup> <https://en.apa.az/foreign-policy/mfa-we-have-repeatedly-stressed-that-the-zangazur-corridor-is-not-directed-against-armenias-sovereignty-483028>

<sup>14</sup> <https://president.az/en/articles/view/52122>

**2. Syria** - The collapse of the Bashar al-Assad regime in December of last year opened new opportunities for Azerbaijan to develop relations with Syria. Under Assad, Syria pursued an Armenia-oriented policy, taking a negative stance toward Azerbaijan, which strained bilateral relations. Just weeks after the regime change in December 2024, Azerbaijan sent 200 tons of humanitarian aid to Syria, signaling its intent to establish positive relations with the new government in Damascus.<sup>15</sup> As noted earlier, from April 2025, Azerbaijan facilitated deconfliction talks between representatives of Israel and Türkiye, as well as Israel and Syria, to contribute to stability in Syria. On 12 July 2025, Ahmad al-Sharaa, President of the Syrian Arab Republic for the transitional period, paid an official visit to Baku, marking a high point in bilateral relations. During this visit, prospects for cooperation across various sectors were discussed, and a Memorandum of Understanding was signed regarding the export of Azerbaijani gas to Syria.<sup>16</sup> As of 2 August 2025, the agreement came into effect, and Azerbaijan began exporting natural gas to Syria via Türkiye, initially at an annual volume of 3.4 billion cubic meters.

**3. Gulf States** - Azerbaijan's relations with the Gulf countries are dynamically developing, covering areas such as energy, investments, infrastructure projects, agriculture, digital technologies, security, tourism, and others. It should be noted that in recent years, Azerbaijan has placed particular emphasis on the green energy agenda, working closely with companies from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which have made significant investments in solar and wind energy projects across various regions of the country.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, when discussing Azerbaijan's relations with the Gulf states, it is also important to highlight the growing tourism cooperation with such countries as UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Oman.

**4. Israel** - Since the 1990s, Azerbaijan-Israel relations have developed to encompass energy, agriculture, defense, technology, and other sectors. Today, Azerbaijan and Israel maintain successful political and economic cooperation, alongside a strategic dialogue. Israeli companies specializing in agriculture, cybersecurity, IT, and other fields actively contribute to the development of Azerbaijan's sectors. Both bilaterally and within international institutions, Israel has consistently supported Azerbaijan's sovereignty and territorial integrity.<sup>18</sup>

**5. Iraq** - Azerbaijan and Iraq share a historical friendship, with relations developing positively across political, economic, cultural, and other sectors. Active engagements continue to explore new opportunities for cooperation. In 2023, Iraq's President, Abdul Latif Jamal Rashid, visited Azerbaijan, during which important documents were

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.mfa.gov.az/en/news/no52124>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.turkiyetoday.com/business/azerbaijan-to-export-natural-gas-to-syria-via-turkiye-3204190>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.azernews.az/analysis/246662.html>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.mfa.gov.az/en/category/asia-and-oceania/israel>

signed in political, social, tourism, and transportation fields in the presence of the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev.<sup>19</sup>

**6. Iran** - Azerbaijan maintains cooperation with its neighbor Iran in trade, energy, transportation, agriculture, security, and other areas. The construction of the Aras Corridor, which will link Azerbaijan to Nakhchivan via Iran, is currently underway.<sup>20</sup> One of the most significant regional projects connecting the two countries is the North-South Corridor, which links Northern Europe to the Indian Ocean and holds strategic importance for both Azerbaijan and Iran. Despite occasional points of tension, Azerbaijan has consistently supported the development of constructive relations with Iran.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the recent intensification of Azerbaijan's Middle East policy can be attributed to the interplay of geopolitical and normative prerequisites, the effective use of targeted foreign policy instruments, and the alignment of its strategic objectives. Azerbaijan's primary aim is to promote security, cooperation, and development in the Middle East in a manner that benefits all parties. To this end, Baku actively engages in regional political processes and works to strengthen its trade and economic relations with countries across the region. Moreover, Azerbaijan's proactive approach ranging from energy diplomacy and humanitarian assistance to mediation efforts enhances its soft power and positions the country as a reliable and constructive partner. By leveraging its historical, cultural, and geopolitical advantages, Azerbaijan is steadily shaping a vision of regional stability that aligns the interests of multiple actors, strengthening its role as a bridge between diverse countries and cultures.

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<sup>19</sup> <https://president.az/en/articles/view/62267>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/baku-signs-deal-with-tehran-for-transportation-lines-to-nakhchivan-via-iran/3014861>