



ANALYSIS

AZERBAIJAN-MALAYSIA RELATIONS AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF KARABAKH

Summary

Azerbaijan-Malaysia relations were established three decades ago when Azerbaijan had just achieved independence due to the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991. Malaysia is the second country from Southeast Asia after Indonesia to establish diplomatic relations with Azerbaijan. However, there is no denying that the relationship between the people from the South Caucasus and the Malay world has been intertwined for a long time, especially in Islamic studies and civilization. However, the relationship did not develop due to the distance factor and the politics of the Cold War. Malaysia and Azerbaijan relations have been revived after the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In addition, due to globalization's development, the distance barrier is no longer a dividing factor between Baku and Kuala Lumpur. Therefore, this article analyses the relationship between Azerbaijan and Malaysia in terms of diplomatic relations and Malaysia's support of Azerbaijan during the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict and economic cooperation. In addition, this article also discusses the reconstruction efforts of the Karabakh region, the challenges that must be faced, and the role that countries of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, such as Malaysia, can play.

30 Years of Azerbaijan-Malaysia Friendship

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the Azerbaijan-Malaysia diplomatic relations as the two countries' relations were established on 5 April 1993. Thus, Azerbaijan opened its embassy in Kuala Lumpur in June 2007, while the Malaysian embassy in Baku was opened on 1 April 2014. Azerbaijan sees Malaysia as a progressive Islamic country and the 'Tiger of Southeast Asia,' backed by good economic reforms and rapid development, said former Azerbaijani Ambassador to Malaysia Professor Dr. Qaley Allahverdiyev. According to him, Azerbaijan wants to emulate Malaysia as an economic development model.¹

¹ <https://www.theborneopost.com/2013/05/10/azerbaijan-regards-malaysia-as-tiger-of-southeast-asia/>

Qaley Allahverdiyev has served as the Ambassador of Azerbaijan to Malaysia since 2013. He held the Dean of Diplomatic Corps status, where he was the longest-serving foreign ambassador in Malaysia. Therefore, it is noteworthy that during the Yang Dipertuan Agong's (King) Birthday Celebration Ceremony in June 2020, Qaley Allahverdiyev was honored on behalf of all foreign delegates and congratulated the Malaysian government on the success of controlling the spread of the COVID-19 virus.² After serving more than eight years, Qaley Allahverdiyev returned to Azerbaijan and Irfan Davudov is the current ambassador.

Interestingly, the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan was established in 1918, the first democratic republic in the Muslim world.³ It became part of the Soviet Union (USSR) in 1919 when the Soviet Union expanded its influence into the Central Asian region. However, the country regained its independence in 1991 after the fall of the Soviet Union. Azerbaijan is located in the Caucasus region bordering Iran (south), Georgia (northwest), Armenia (west) and Russia (north). It is also located on the shores of the Caspian Sea. Also, the exclusive Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic (Naxçıvan) of the Republic of Azerbaijan is located in southwestern Azerbaijan, bordered by Armenia, Iran, and Türkiye. Azerbaijan's population is about 10 million, and most are Muslims (97 per cent).

Azerbaijan's high economic growth is due to the rapid growth of crude oil and natural gas exports; the non-petrol sector, such as construction, banking, and real estate, has also shown growth. It must be noted that crude oil export mainly via the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline (BTC) as well as natural gas export via the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC) are the primary economic drivers for Azerbaijan's economy. The country uses efficiently the energy earnings to develop other sectors of economy and support reconstruction of liberated territories.

Although they may be far apart, Azerbaijan and Malaysia have several similarities, among which most of the population is Muslim. However, the rights and freedoms of the non-Muslim population are still protected by their respective constitutions. In addition, the history of both countries has been the center of Islamic civilization. Malaysia and Azerbaijan are also located in strategic trade route areas. This is because Azerbaijan, in the South Caucasus region, connects trade routes and oil pipelines from Central Asia to Türkiye and Europe. While Malaysia, which is located in Southeast Asia, connects shipping routes from East Asia with South Asia and then to West Asia and Europe through the Malacca Strait. Azerbaijan and Malaysia are also oil-producing countries and are members of OPEC Plus.

Azerbaijan has a long history and civilization. It gave birth to many extraordinary thinkers, poets, and scientists. Among the Islamic scientists and philosophers such as Abul Hasan Bakhmanyar (11th century), who authored many works on mathematics and philosophy and Abul Hasan Shirvani (11th and 12th centuries), an author in the field of Islamic Astronomy. One of the prominent figures in the history of

² https://bernama.com/en/general/news_covid-19.php?id=1870966

³ <https://nationaltoday.com/founding-of-the-democratic-republic-of-azerbaijan/>

Azerbaijan was Sarah Khatun, the first female Muslim diplomat in the Islamic world.⁴ Azerbaijan, rich in its history and Islamic traditions, has a lot to offer for future cooperation with Malaysia in the area of research into Islamic civilization. Besides that, Azerbaijan is famous as a tourist destination because of its natural beauty and historical relics. Moreover, its capital Baku is a modern city with Turkic and Islamic characteristics. It is interesting to note that Azerbaijan's ambassador to Malaysia, Irfan Davudov, has emphasised that Malaysia and Azerbaijan have enormous, untapped potential in trade and other areas, including education, scientific research, culture, art and tourism.⁵

Following the establishment of the two embassies, Petronas Azerbaijan began operations in Baku in 2015 and currently, its investment is estimated at US \$ 5 billion. The Joint Declaration on Friendship and Cooperation between Azerbaijan and Malaysia was signed, which contributed to greater cooperation between the two countries in the energy and exploration sectors. Petronas is actively involved in Azerbaijan's oil and gas industry. Petronas has acquired a 15.5 per cent stake in a production partnership agreement with Shah Deniz II, a 15.5 per cent stake in the South Caucasus Pipeline Company (SCPC), and a 12.4 per cent stake in the Azerbaijani Gas Supply Company (AGSC).⁶ However, in 2021 PETRONAS Azerbaijan (Shah Deniz) S.à r.l. and PETRONAS South Caucasus S.à r.l. disposed of all Azerbaijan assets, and the proceeds of this disposal have been repatriated to Malaysia.

It is worth noting that Azerbaijan hosted the 18th Non-Aligned Movement or NAM Conference in 2019, and President Ilham Aliyev, President of Azerbaijan, is the current Chairman of NAM until 2022. Former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad paid a courtesy call to President Ilham Aliyev while attending the NAM Conference. The meeting between the two leaders lasted for 20 minutes. President Ilham stated that Malaysia-Azerbaijan cooperation is crucial in the energy sector and has the potential to be expanded into other areas as well, tourism, Islamic banking, science and technology and education sectors.

Malaysia has been a strong supporter of Azerbaijan in facing the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. Malaysia supports four UN Resolutions (UNSC 822, 853, 874, 884), which have been adopted by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), demanding the immediate, unconditional withdrawal of Armenian troops from Azerbaijani territory. At the same time, Malaysia also sponsored Resolution 62/243 entitled 'Situation in the Occupied Territories of Azerbaijan' during the 62nd Session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) on 14 March 2008.⁷ Furthermore, Malaysia supports international efforts to immediately withdraw the Armenian army from all occupied territories in Azerbaijan. In July 2020, Inter-parliamentary Malaysia-Azerbaijan, Malaysia issued a strong statement supporting Azerbaijan on the Armenian military attempting to invade Tovuz province on the Azerbaijani-Armenian border.⁸

⁴ <https://www.azernews.az/nation/127657.html>

⁵ <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2022/05/800222/azerbaijan-seeks-boost-trade-investment-tourism-ties-malaysia>

⁶ <https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/petronas-selling-entire-155-stake-shah-deniz-gas-project-lukoil-over-rm9b>

⁷ <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/622595>

⁸ <https://defence.az/en/news/144362/malaysian-parliament-expresses-strong-support-to-azerbaijan>

Apart from Malaysia, members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) also support Azerbaijan acquiring its territory under international law. Azerbaijan greatly appreciates the support provided by the OIC concerning the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict. The 44-day Patriotic War ended the nearly 30-year occupation by Armenia of part of the internationally recognized territory of Azerbaijan. As a result, Azerbaijan restored its territorial integrity, meeting the requirements of the UN Security Council's relevant resolutions and various resolutions issued by the OIC.

Reconstruction of Karabakh and Challenges

After the liberation of Karabakh from Armenian occupation, Azerbaijan began a massive reconstruction effort. This reconstruction process includes plans to redevelop Karabakh region, ensure the safe return of refugees, provide welfare and economic projects for all residents and restart cultural and historical centers. The Government of Azerbaijan built the Fuzuli International Airport within eight months. It was inaugurated by the President of Azerbaijan, President Ilham Aliyev, and the President of Türkiye, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.⁹ Also, on October 20, 2022 President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan attended the inauguration ceremony of a new airport in Zangilan region. Zangilan International Airport is Azerbaijan's second airport in territories reclaimed from Armenia during the 2020 Karabakh war.¹⁰

In addition, roads in the Karabakh region are currently being built so that infrastructure facilities allow refugees to return. It should be emphasized that in the quest for reconciliation, Azerbaijan is working to ensure that all parties comply. President Ilham Aliyev plans to develop the Karabakh region as a heritage area for the Muslim and non-Muslim populations. This area has the potential to be developed as a cultural and tourism area. In line with that, significant projects are being implemented in the city of Shusha, Karabakh, Azerbaijan, including the restoration of the tomb of the poet Molla Panah Vagif, and the house museum of the great Azerbaijani singer Bulbul and composer Uzeyir Hajibeyli, as well as the restoration of history, religious centers and monuments of Islamic architecture.¹¹

Besides, the government of Azerbaijan, in cooperation with Türkiye, is working to develop the Zangazur Economic Corridor, which acts as a link between the South Caucasus region and other economic corridors such as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Middle Corridor and the European Silk Road. Furthermore, Azerbaijan is now investing its financial resources to transform the Karabakh region from a battlefield into a smart city and smart villages. The main focus is to help one million internally displaced people (IDPs). At the time, Pakistan and Türkiye cooperated with Azerbaijan through the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue to develop the Karabakh region.

It should be especially underlined that since the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict broke out, landmines have become one of the primary weapons. According to the United Nations (UN) experts, more than 1 million landmines have been planted in the Karabakh region, and more than 50 billion USD are needed to

⁹ <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/erdogan-aliyev-inaugurate-fuzuli-international-airport-in-azerbaijan>

¹⁰ <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/erdogan-attends-opening-of-zangilan-airport-in-azerbaijan-177863>

¹¹ <https://culture.gov.az/en/common-news/13254>

implement landmine destruction efforts. Since the liberation of the Karabakh region, many Azerbaijanis have tried to return to the Karabakh region, which is their home village; unfortunately, they had to face the threat of landmines. Since November 2020, 242 landmine explosions have occurred, causing 40 people to be killed and 202 to be injured. Currently, the area planted with landmines is approximately 530 million square meters, and nearly 68,000 landmines have been detected.¹²

According to Azerbaijan's Deputy Foreign Minister Elnur Mammadov, the government of Azerbaijan had to take 10-12 years to clear the Karabakh region of landmines completely. Currently, the operation to destroy landmines is recognized by the Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action (ANAMA); with the strength of 600 people, they have met 750 unexploded missiles and rockets, 4,500 anti-personnel landmines, and 2,000 anti-tank mines were found and destroyed.¹³ However, it should be emphasized that detecting landmines is done manually, through machines and with the help of sniffer dogs.

However, many landmines still have yet to be detected, and ANAMA has limitations, especially when the Armenian side does not fully cooperate. Moreover, the landmine map supplied by Armenia is inaccurate. Since November 2020, landmine explosions have killed 14 Azerbaijani civilians, including five soldiers. Among the latest victims are two journalists and a government official who have caused anxiety and anger among residents. In addition, 25 soldiers and eight civilians were injured due to landmine explosions.¹⁴ In the post-conflict era, civilians have become victims of landmine explosions, especially farmers working in the fields and children playing in the yard, unaware that their area is filled with landmines. The cauldron is a dangerous weapon because it is capable of causing terrible destruction even after the Conflict has ended. Victims are not limited to security personnel but include civilians.

Therefore, the international community needs to act to assist in locating and destroying landmines in the Karabakh region. Azerbaijan cooperates with the UN and other international organizations to speed up de-escalation operations. The UN has provided as many as 2 million USD for emergency humanitarian assistance in the conflict-affected areas of Azerbaijan. With an additional 1 million USD from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) to ANAMA to train and equip emergency response teams to detect and defuse mines. In addition, ANAMA is conducting an education and landmine risk campaign with the UN children's agency UNICEF to raise awareness among the local population.¹⁵

The organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) countries should act proactively. For example, Türkiye has supplied Mechanical Equipment for the Destruction of Fire Pots (MEMATT). In addition, Turkish mine detection experts are training their counterparts from Azerbaijan and participating in de-mining operations. Malaysia, as a member of the OIC, can also contribute to efforts to detect and defuse mines.¹⁶ The Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF) has expertise and experience in such operations when involved in

¹² <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/azerbaijan-clears-55000-mines-laid-by-armenia-in-liberated-areas/news>

¹³ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/9/nagorno-karabakh-a-land-still-laced-with-mines-a-year-after-war>

¹⁴ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/4/azerbaijani-journalists-official-killed-in-kalbajar-blast>

¹⁵ <https://reliefweb.int/report/azerbaijan/anama-and-undp-join-forces-support-mine-action-azerbaijan>

¹⁶ <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/turkiye-sends-more-mematt-minesweepers-to-azerbaijan-2022-7-31-0/>

UN peacekeeping missions in Cambodia and Bosnia. However, MAF is the primary victim of homemade landmines or cryptic traps planted by communist terrorists on the Malaysia-Thailand border. Landmine incidents often occurred in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The last case of the Malaysian army being a victim of landmines occurred in 1993, when a soldier, while on patrol in Kedah near the Malaysia-Thailand border, was injured due to landmines planted by communist terrorists. In addition, one of the Malaysian soldiers was killed by a landmine while on duty in the Peacekeeping Mission in Bosnia.

Malaysia once experienced the threat of landmines. Therefore, in the international community's spirit of family and cooperation, Malaysia can share equipment and expertise with Azerbaijan to detect and defuse landmines. Although geographically, Malaysia and Azerbaijan are far apart, they share many commonalities. Among them, Malaysia and Azerbaijan have a majority Muslim population. Both countries are members of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and the United Nations (UN). Malaysia and Azerbaijan have worked together and will continue working on international issues of mutual interest. For example, suppose Azerbaijan considers Malaysia the 'Tiger of Southeast Asia'. In that case, Azerbaijan can be considered a 'Horse for the Caucasus and Central Asian region' to bring closer cooperation between Central Asia and the outside world.

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