

## Israel, US look to Azerbaijan for help.

By YAAKOV KATZ      BAKU, Azerbaijan  
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Azerbaijan was a strategic partner to Israel and the US and could play a major role in the current showdown with Iran over its nuclear ambitions, foreign diplomats stationed here said over the weekend.

US officials stationed in Baku said that Azerbaijan, wedged in between Russia in the north and Iran in the south, could possibly use the 20 million Azeris who lived in northern Iran to convince the radical regime and its extremist President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to back down from developing nuclear arms.

"The Azeris in Iran could possibly lead a coup and assist in overthrowing the current regime there," one official told The Jerusalem Post. "They see that Azerbaijan life is improving and becoming more westernized while in Iran they are continuously suffering."

US officials said they had an "extraordinary relationship" with Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev who granted them permission to use the country to flyover and stop in throughout the war in Afghanistan and Iraq. In total, 142 US planes, officials said, flew over Azeri skies in 2005.

"Azerbaijan regards militant political Islam as a threat to itself," a senior US diplomat stationed here said. A Muslim and predominately Shi'ite but secular country, Azerbaijan, the official said, has been serving as a strategic partner to the US in the global war on terrorism since 9/11 and has troops stationed in Afghanistan.

The US military reportedly has listening stations along Azerbaijan's border with Iran. According to other media reports, the US and Israel have considered using Azerbaijan as a launching pad for an attack on Iran's nuclear reactors.

In public however, Azeri officials have ruled out the possibility that their land would be used in an aggressive attack on Iran. Last Monday, Aliyev told Iran's envoy to Baku that he would not allow the US to launch an attack from his country's territory.

US officials here said that if they wanted to attack Iran they could always use Iraq or Afghanistan where the army is already heavily stationed.

"We will probably not let the US use Azerbaijan to launch a strike on Iran," Azeri Minister of Emergency Situations Kamaladdin Heydarov told the Post Saturday night adding that an attack on Iran would destabilize the region. "We need to restrain Iran," the minister continued. "But if the US attacks [Iran] it will bring bad results to the entire region."

Local Jews said they were afraid of the Iranian situation and that its shock waves would reach Baku, which, until now, is a safe and anti-Semitic-free place for Jews. If Iran were attacked, especially by troops based in Azerbaijan, the Jews said, they might feel repercussions.

"All we want is for things to stay quiet and the way they have been

for years," said Reuven Ismailov, a local Baku Jew. "We are afraid of anything that might unbalance the region."

Israel having an embassy in Baku, said it viewed relations with Baku to be of extreme importance.

Israel's Ambassador to Baku, Arthur Lenk, told a meeting of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations visiting here that Azerbaijan might use the Ashkelon-Eilat oil pipeline to transfer oil it plans to begin retrieving from the Caspian Sea to countries in the West.

Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference, said he was optimistic Azerbaijan would remain loyal to its relationship with Israel throughout the Iranian crisis. "The message from here has been very clear," Hoenlein said. "Azerbaijan takes its relationship with Israel very seriously and they could play a key role in the Iranian showdown."

Hoenlein was leading a 100-person delegation to Azerbaijan this weekend for talks with local Jewish leaders and government officials. "We looked forward to this very timely gathering in view of our heightened concern regarding the Jewish communities in Europe, Russia and Asia as the war on terrorism moves ahead," Hoenlein said of the trip.

On Monday, the group is scheduled to meet with President Aliyev and Azeri Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov.

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