

Israel Inks Arms Deal With Azerbaijan

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JERUSALEM – Israeli defense officials confirmed \$1.6 billion in deals to sell drones as well as anti-aircraft and missile defense systems to Azerbaijan, bringing sophisticated Israeli technology to the doorstep of archenemy Iran.

The sales by state-run Israel Aerospace Industries come at a delicate time. Israel has been laboring hard to form diplomatic ties in a region that has grown increasingly hostile to the Jewish state.

Its most pressing concern is Iran's nuclear program, and Israeli leaders have hinted broadly that they would be prepared to attack Iranian nuclear facilities if they see no other way to keep Tehran from building bombs.

It was not clear whether the arms deal with Azerbaijan was connected to any potential Israeli plans to strike Iran. The Israeli defense officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not at liberty to discuss defense deals.

Azerbaijan has for years been locked in a bitter dispute with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, an Armenian-

populated enclave in western Azerbaijan that declared itself independent after a vicious war in the 1990s.

The conflict has heated up during recent months, which saw a series of shootings along the enclave's border with Azerbaijan proper and repeated threats from the government in Baku to regain its land by military force.

Danny Yatom, a former head of Israel's Mossad spy agency, said the timing of the deal was likely coincidental.

"Such a deal ... takes a long period of time to become ripe," he said. "If it will help us in challenging Iran, it is for the better."

Israel's ties with Azerbaijan have grown as its once-strong strategic relationship with another Iranian neighbor, Turkey, has deteriorated, most sharply over Israel's killing of nine Turks aboard a ship that sought to breach Israel's blockade of the Gaza Strip in 2010.

For Israeli intelligence, there is also an added benefit from Azerbaijan: its significant cross-border contacts and trade with Iran's large ethnic Azeri community.

For that same reason, as Iran's nuclear showdown with the West deepens, the Islamic republic sees the Azeri frontier as a weak point, even though both countries are mostly Shiite Muslim.

Earlier this month, Iran's Foreign Ministry accused Azerbaijan of allowing Mossad to operate on its territory and providing a corridor for "terrorists" to kill members of Iranian nuclear scientists.

Azerbaijan dismissed the Iranian claims as "slanderous lies." Israeli leaders have hinted at covert campaigns against Iran without admitting involvement.

Israel, meanwhile, recently claimed authorities foiled Iranian-sponsored attacks against Israeli targets in Azerbaijan.

(AP, MT)

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