Baku's foreign policy course amid escalation in the Near East

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Annotation

The ARVAK Center analyzes Azerbaijan's current foreign policy strategy against the backdrop of the unfolding geopolitical crisis in the Near East. It examines the reasons for the cooling of relations between Baku and Ankara, the consequences of the Azerbaijani leadership's conspicuous diplomatic demarches, and the extent to which global power centers – the United States and Israel – influence key state decisions. Particular attention is paid to the risks of the republic being drawn into a large-scale confrontation and to efforts to counter the Turkish doctrine in the South Caucasus.

Keywords: *Azerbaijan, Turkey, Israel, Iran, Ilham Aliyev, geopolitical crisis, Near East, Organization of Turkic States summit, foreign policy pressure, United States.*

1. Azerbaijan's role in the regional geopolitical crisis

The unfolding geopolitical crisis in the Near East, which analysts believe could escalate into a large-scale Middle East war, has highlighted Azerbaijan's growing regional importance. Baku's position is becoming crucial to the balance of power ahead of a decisive new phase of escalation, as Ilham Aliyev's regime is being drawn ever more deeply into the clash of interests among major global and regional actors.

President I. Aliyev is fully aware of Azerbaijan's strategic importance within the system of regional contradictions and regards this position as an opportunity to secure maximum political advantage in order to strengthen the state and the incumbent regime. At the same time, experts emphasize that direct involvement in the escalating rivalry among major powers entails existential risks for the republic. In the context of a possible redrawing of geopolitical boundaries in the region, the vulnerability of the Azerbaijani state is increasing substantially, owing to the absence of effective institutional mechanisms to counter external threats and to the fact that certain regional actors challenge its historical agency. According to a number of analysts, the chain of successes achieved since 2020 has encouraged the head of state to take political risks and overestimate his own capabilities, while the extreme concentration of power has deprived the state system of domestic political checks and balances.

The resolution of the Karabakh conflict by force strengthened Baku's confidence and prompted the Azerbaijani authorities to reconsider their modes of engagement with Tehran and Moscow. According to local analysts, Ilham Aliyev took consistent steps to shift dialogue with the Russian Federation from a model of "*vertical subordination*" to one of "*equal partnership*". On the Iranian track, by contrast, Baku escalated tensions, demonstrating its readiness for direct confrontation should the Islamic Republic of Iran continue to pursue a "*revisionist course*" in the South Caucasus.

Turkey provided the foundation for pursuing such a resolute policy, since Aliyev's strategy fully aligned with its interests in the Black Sea–Caspian region. Tel Aviv also provided substantial assistance to Azerbaijan, particularly in its confrontation with Iran. By skillfully combining Turkish and Israeli support, Baku strengthened its own position and steadily weakened Moscow's and Tehran's remaining influence in the republic.

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2. Transformation of relations between Baku and Ankara: Hypotheses and diplomatic context

At the same time, a trend has recently emerged toward a certain distancing of Baku from Turkish influence. This conclusion holds provided that the existing disagreements between Azerbaijan and Turkey are not the result of a pre-planned simulation of tensions. The possibility of such a scenario cannot be ruled out: amid anticipated large-scale escalation and geopolitical transformations in the Middle East, the Declaration on Allied Relations signed in Shushi on June 15, 2021, could become a burdensome commitment for both sides. The obligations assumed under it could prevent them from avoiding direct involvement in the large-scale armed conflict announced by the United States and Israel.

Under this hypothesis, a conspicuous cooling of relations would allow Ankara to justify its inability to provide Baku with full-scale military assistance in the event of a military clash with Iran. For Azerbaijan, such a situation would create credible grounds for minimizing its involvement in anti-Iranian actions.

According to the second hypothesis, the deterioration of Azerbaijani-Turkish relations came as an unexpected development for the Turkish side. This move, however, was less an independent decision by the Azerbaijani leadership than a forced response to substantial foreign policy pressure from Israel and the United States. Significantly, tensions between Baku and Ankara intensified following an Azerbaijani diplomatic demarche prompted by an initiative of Benjamin Netanyahu's government, dated June 28, 2026, to recognize the Armenian Genocide and submit the relevant bill for consideration by the Knesset. According to official statements by the Israeli side, it was precisely Baku's principled position that prevented the document from advancing in parliament and prompted the Israeli prime minister to remove the "Armenian case" from the agenda amid escalating differences with Turkey.

Following these diplomatic maneuvers within the Ankara–Baku–Tel Aviv configuration, Azerbaijan clearly demonstrated the priority it attaches to relations with each of its key regional partners. This was directly confirmed by an official statement from Azerbaijan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs dated May 29, 2026, which stressed that developing relations with the Republic of Turkey was an unconditional priority for Baku and that Israel should take this position into account. This once again affirmed Turkey's role as a key ally with the most firmly established position within Azerbaijan's political system and elite circles. Nevertheless, some time later, the assertion that the Turkish-Azerbaijani alliance was inviolable and had successfully withstood the test of the "*provocative*" Israeli initiative concerning the "Armenian case" once again became a subject of debate.

3. Causes and manifestations of a new round of tensions in Turkish-Azerbaijani relations

The latest round of tensions between Ankara and Baku was driven not so much by mass protests by Azerbaijani believers against the ban on wearing hijabs in educational institutions – as most international media currently interpret it – as by processes that had begun much earlier. Signs of mutual unfriendly conduct had been observed by both sides as early as the spring of this year, although evidence of mounting discontent was kept out of the public domain for a long time. In particular, dissatisfaction was growing in certain Turkish political

circles with Azerbaijan's desire to retain control over the course of Turkish-Armenian negotiations on normalizing relations and opening the borders. Against this backdrop, discussion in Turkey's socio-political and media discourse once again intensified regarding Turkey's key contribution to the "*Karabakh victory*" – a factor whose significance official Baku is currently seeking to systematically downplay or leave unacknowledged.

For its part, the Azerbaijani side expressed considerable dissatisfaction with Ankara's actions, which, in Baku's view, demonstrated disregard for Azerbaijan's role as an equal strategic partner, as well as for the attributes of its statehood. In particular, according to Azerbaijani media reports, in late spring 2026 official circles in Baku expressed extreme concern that Turkey was represented at the 28 May celebrations marking Azerbaijan's Independence Day by Minister of Transport and Infrastructure Abdulkadir Uraloglu, rather than by the country's vice president or the speaker of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, as had previously been the case. Another source of tension was the refusal to grant a request by the Azerbaijani Embassy in Turkey to illuminate prominent landmarks in Ankara in the colors of the Azerbaijani national flag. Given that similar requests had routinely been granted in the past, this decision points to substantial disagreements in relations between the two allied states.

Consequently, the strong reaction by Ankara's political and media networks to the Azerbaijani leadership's "*anti-religious and discriminatory*" actions was not the root cause of the conflict between the two sides, but merely another stage in its further intensification.

The circumstances surrounding the disagreement between Ankara and Baku received extensive media coverage. Key episodes in this political and diplomatic tension included a sharp statement directed at the Azerbaijani leadership by Oktay Saral, chief adviser to the President of Turkey; the subsequent statement of the Milli Majlis working group on interparliamentary relations with Turkey, dated October 13, 2026; and the publication by Azerbaijan's MFA of a list of 31 Turkish public figures whose presence on the territory of the republic was declared undesirable.

It appeared that Saral's resignation, arranged directly by Erdoğan, would reduce the level of escalation. Analysts believed that the Turkish leader had set aside his uncompromising principles and "*taken a step back*", expecting I. Aliyev to take reciprocal steps to de-escalate tensions. These expectations, however, were not fulfilled: the Azerbaijani president chose instead to deepen his anti-Turkish *demarche*. Its main manifestation was I. Aliyev's conspicuous refusal to travel to Ankara for the summit of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), despite a personal telephone request from R. T. Erdoğan. As a result, Azerbaijan's delegation was headed not by the head of state but by Foreign Minister J. Bayramov.

For the Turkish leader, however, the most telling manifestation of diplomatic tension was I. Aliyev's refusal to attend the summit on the grounds that he needed to be in Baku for the closing ceremony and award presentation to the winners of the FIFA U-15 Youth World Championship and festival. In terms of international protocol, this step constituted an unequivocal demonstration of disregard for a partner and the leader of an allied state, while also lowering the standing of the OTS summit, which is important to Ankara. This demarche indicates that the Azerbaijani side may be prepared not only to reconsider the nature of its bilateral relations with Turkey, but also to review the key foundations of its foreign policy orientation, development strategy, and geopolitical alignment. The decision sends a clear signal to Ankara, and directly to R. T. Erdoğan, of an intention to counter the implementation of the Turkish doctrine of "*Greater Turan*".

4. External pressure and the role of international actors (U.S., Israel)

According to experts, I. Aliyev's such a confident line of conduct would hardly have been possible without the involvement of external actors. It seems likely that the Azerbaijani leader is not interested in further complicating relations with Ankara but is compelled to act under pressure from global centers of power. There is a strong likelihood that the U.S. and Israel are encouraging Azerbaijan's ruling regime to act in their own interests. As part of their strategy, they employ not only incentives but also pressure tactics, including compromising material.

In this context, it should be noted that the destabilization of Azerbaijan's domestic political situation coincided with a number of high-profile international scandals involving the republic's leadership. In its earlier comment of October 19, 2026 ("The October 2026 events in Azerbaijan: The religious factor and foreign policy pressure"), the ARVAK Center considered it highly likely that coordinated pressure was being brought to bear on official Baku both domestically (in view of the October protests by believers triggered by the ban on religious symbols in educational institutions) and internationally. External factors included an intelligence-related incident in Germany involving references to Azerbaijan's special services, a strongly worded European Parliament resolution of October 7, 2026, and a new wave of reports in foreign media concerning investigations into the Aliyev family's financial mechanisms and overseas assets. On the basis of these facts, it was suggested that this sequence of events might mark the beginning of a coordinated, synergistic campaign aimed at prompting the Azerbaijani authorities to act in the interests of the U.S.-Israeli alliance, primarily on the Iranian track. In light of the subsequent significant deterioration in Turkish-Azerbaijani relations, it is also plausible that systematic external pressure on I. Aliyev's administration was intended to undermine Ankara's strategic line in the South Caucasus and thwart its efforts to prevent Baku from becoming involved in a large-scale conflict against the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Pressure on I. Aliyev continues to mount. A confirmation of this assessment came with the publication of information from the Netherlands' military intelligence service (MIVD) concerning multibillion-dollar bank accounts, funds from which were subsequently used by Donald Trump's son-in-law and special envoy of the U.S. Administration Jared Kushner to advance Washington's and Tel Aviv's foreign policy in the Middle East. According to the information presented, funds were systematically transferred by several Persian Gulf states using Azerbaijan's banking system. Although discrediting the leadership of the Republic of Azerbaijan was hardly the primary purpose of this publication activity, official Baku once again found itself at the center of a high-profile international scandal, having been drawn into financial and political operations that cast a shadow over the U.S.-Israeli strategy in the region. Thus, this incident served as further evidence of the participation of I. Aliyev's regime in processes of regional transformation that run counter to Tehran's interests and elicit a restrained response from Ankara.

According to experts, against the backdrop of worsening relations between Turkey and Israel, information about Azerbaijan's involvement in J. Kushner's financial schemes has had an extremely adverse effect on Turkish-Azerbaijani cooperation. For R. T. Erdoğan, this development provided further confirmation that I. Aliyev is bound by serious commitments to Ankara's regional rivals and is, in effect, under their external control.

5. Risks and limits of Baku's foreign policy maneuvering

A widespread perception is taking shape that I. Aliyev's foreign policy moves, which are fueling tensions with the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Russian Federation, and the Republic of Turkey, have acquired an inertia of their own and have effectively slipped beyond the control of the leadership in Baku. According to a number of experts, the Azerbaijani leader's understanding of the country's sovereignty and foreign policy potential is theoretical and fails to fully account for the vulnerability of Azerbaijani statehood. Convinced that the country's stability is ensured solely by its geostrategic position, hydrocarbon resources, military potential, and high degree of centralized power, the ruling regime is drawing the republic into risky geopolitical combinations. This course is driven both by subjective factors – personal ambitions and political risk-taking that undermine pragmatic decision-making – and by the need to fulfill commitments to external centers of power in return for the support provided.

President I. Aliyev constantly engages in diplomatic maneuvering, demonstrating to key strategic allies and partners that Azerbaijan's resources and geopolitical potential enable the state to pursue an independent course and escalate tensions, while disregarding, when necessary, the principle of the "*exclusive nature of bilateral relations*". Practice shows that the Azerbaijani leadership has so far effectively used the country's advantageous geographical position, economic resources, military potential, and high degree of power consolidation for these purposes. At the same time, the existing configuration could undergo a substantial transformation if leading international actors were to conclude that further identifying the ruling dynasty with the statehood of Azerbaijan was no longer expedient.