

NCSEJ Country Report

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Azerbaijan

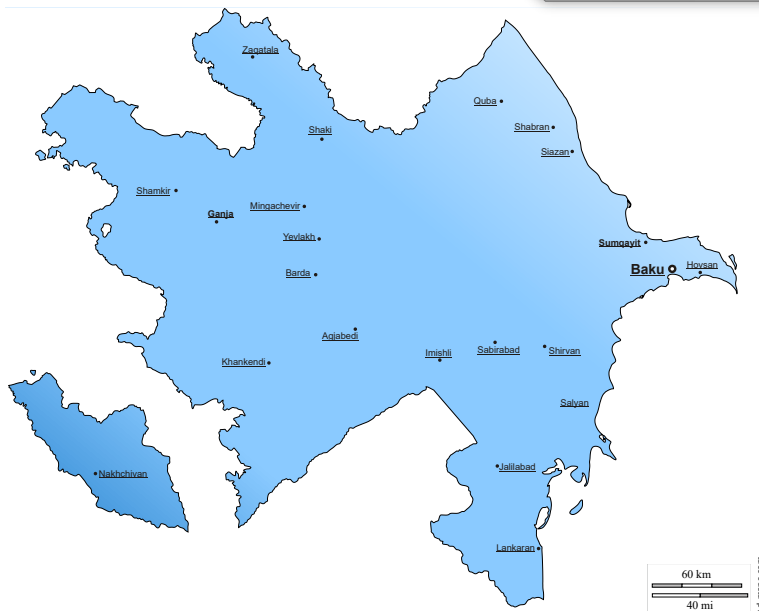


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Executive Summary

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Strategically located on the ancient Silk Road between Europe and Asia, Azerbaijan shares deep ties with both the East and the West. Azerbaijan has nurtured close relations with the United States and Israel, and plays an active role in Western-led counter-terrorist programs.

Rich in natural resources, Azerbaijan's economy depends on the oil, natural gas, steel, and iron industries.

An influx of oil revenues starting in the late 1990s led to significant economic growth. Recent drops in energy prices, however, present some challenges for the Azerbaijani economy as oil prices remain volatile, highlighting Azerbaijan's over-reliance on energy exports.

Jews have been in Azerbaijan for many centuries and, since the breakup of the Soviet Union, have not suffered state-sponsored discrimination. Judaism is officially protected as a "traditional" religion of Azerbaijan, and the community and government work together on various public welfare and educational activities.

Statistics:

Population: 10 million (July 2018 est.) | **Size:** 86,600 sq. km

Capital: Baku

Major cities: Baku, Ganja, Sumgait

Jewish population: 15,000-20,000

Head of State: President Ilham Aliyev

Head of Government: Prime Minister Ali Asadov

Foreign Minister: Jeyhun Bayramov

Ambassador to U.S.: Khazar Ibrahim

U.S. Ambassador to Azerbaijan: Hugo Guevara

Freedom Index:

Not Free

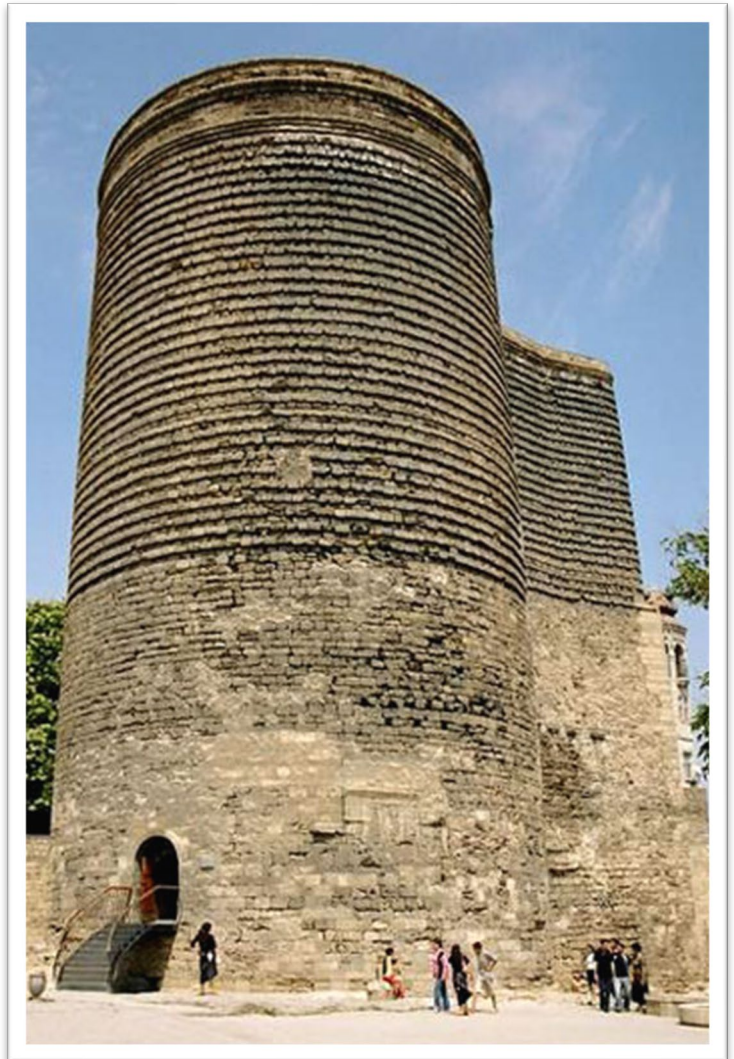
The Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, also known as Azerbaijan People's Republic or Caucasus Azerbaijan in diplomatic documents, was the third democratic republic in the Turkic world and Muslim world, after the Crimean People's Republic and Idel-Ural Republic.

Found in May 28, 1918 by Mahammad Amin Rasulzadeh. Ganja city was the Capital of Azerbaijan People's Republic. In April 1920 Azerbaijan Democratic Republic was taken over by Bolshevik government of Russia. The ADR officially ended on April 28, 1920, giving way to the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic (Azerbaijan SSR) as its successor state. Azerbaijan proclaimed its independence on 30 August 1991, shortly before the dissolution of the USSR in the same year.

Azerbaijan supplied 75% of oil requirements during the second World War.

Azerbaijan is a unitary semi-presidential republic. Azerbaijan has diplomatic relations with 158 countries and holds membership in 38 international organizations, including the United Nations (since 1992), the Council of Europe, the Non-Aligned Movement, the OSCE, and the NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP) program.

It is one of the founding members of GUAM, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. Azerbaijan also holds observer status in the World Trade Organization.



Maiden Tower in Baku, Azerbaijan

Domestic Affairs

Azerbaijan is a constitutional Republic with executive, legislative, and judicial branches. The executive branch dominates and there is no independent judiciary. The President and the National Assembly are elected by popular vote. The President appoints the Council Of Ministers, which is confirmed by the unicameral National Assembly.

The National Assembly- the Parliament - also transliterated as Milli Majlis, is the legislative branch of government in



Map detailing the disputed territories in Azerbaijan and Armenia

Azerbaijan. The unicameral National Assembly has 125 deputies. The most recent parliamentary elections, held in November 2015, resulted in a victory for the ruling New Azerbaijan Party.

Since 1988, Azerbaijan and Armenia have been in conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh territory. In 1994, ethnic Armenian forces conquered almost 20% of Azerbaijan, including all of Nagorno-Karabakh.

A cease-fire was signed in July of the same year, and the captured territory remained under Armenian control. Since 1999, Armenia and Azerbaijan's presidents have held direct talks on the conflict.

On March 14, 2008, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution identifying Nagorno-Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan and calling on Armenia to withdraw its troops. The measure was supported by 39 member states and rejected by seven, including Russia, France, and the United States.

International mediators have failed to make progress on negotiations for a final settlement on Nagorno-Karabakh. No country or international organization recognizes Nagorno-Karabakh's self-proclaimed independence.

Economic Situation

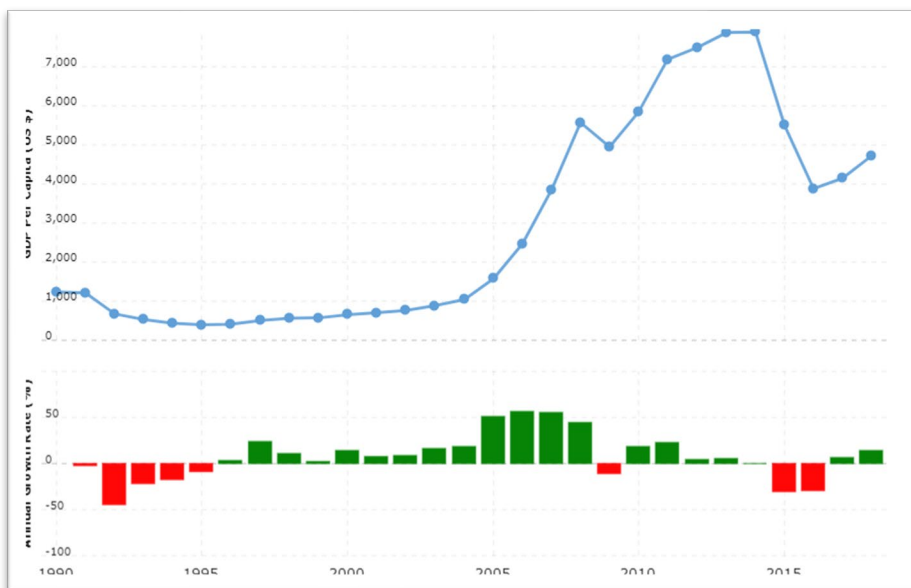
Rich in natural resources, Azerbaijan's economy depends on the oil, natural gas, steel, and iron industries. While most land titles and small businesses have been privatized, post-independence privatization of medium and large-scale enterprises has been haphazard.

During the last several years, the Azerbaijani Government has worked to integrate Azerbaijan's economy into the global economic marketplace, diversifying its economy, attracting foreign investment and maintaining positive growth during the global financial crisis. Investment opportunities in the energy, transportation, and agricultural sectors have continued to attract foreign investment.

Development of Caspian energy resources and increased foreign investment, however, remain the backbone of Azerbaijan's economic growth.

The decline in oil prices in 2015 severely affected Azerbaijan's economy. Azerbaijan's GDP declined, and its currency experienced significant devaluation. The economic crisis underscores the urgent need for Azerbaijan to diversify its economy.

Currency: 1.7 Azerbaijani Manats = \$1 (2018)
GDP: \$46.940 billion (2018 est.)
GDP per capita: \$4,780 (2018 est.)
GDP Growth: 1.4% (2018 est.)



Azerbaijan GDP growth (1990-2015)

Relations with the United States

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A strong partnership with the United States plays a major role in Azerbaijan's foreign policy. This has held true ever since the U.S. recognized Azerbaijan's independence on December 25, 1991 and moved swiftly to establish diplomatic relations between the two countries two months later.

The U.S. opened an Embassy in Baku in March, 1992. Azerbaijan's Embassy in Washington, DC was opened in April, 1993. In 2005, Azerbaijan's Consulate General in Los Angeles was established.



Ambassador of Republic of Azerbaijan to the United States, Elin Suleymanov

After the tragic events of September 11, 2001, Azerbaijan was among the first countries to join the International Anti-Terror Coalition. In a strong show of support, Azerbaijan granted unconditional clearance for U.S. military planes to enter Azerbaijan's air space long before Operation Enduring Freedom began in Afghanistan.

Azerbaijan provides ground and naval transit for roughly 40% of the international coalition's supplies bound for Afghanistan.

Today, Azerbaijan remains a staunch ally of the U.S. in its fight against international terrorism. Azerbaijani troops have been serving in Afghanistan with U.S. soldiers, just as they did previously in the Balkans and in Iraq.

Relations with the United States (Cont.)

The U.S. and Azerbaijan also participate jointly in the Caspian Guard Program that targets the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism and smuggling, as well as secures and protects Caspian energy and transportation corridors.

In September 2010, President Ilham Aliyev met with President Barack Obama in New York on the sidelines of the 65th session of the UN General Assembly. The meeting was of great importance in terms of discussing a range of bilateral and multilateral issues and setting a concrete agenda for the further development of the Azerbaijani-U.S. partnership.

Inter-parliamentary relations between the two countries are also expanding. The visit of an Azerbaijan Parliamentary delegation headed by the First Lady of Azerbaijan, Mrs. Mehriban Aliyeva, in her capacity as Chairperson of the Azerbaijan-U.S. Inter-Parliamentary Working Group, to Washington, D.C. in December 2006 contributed significantly to strengthening such ties.



Ambassador of the United States to Azerbaijan, Earle D. Litzenberger

Azerbaijan remains one of the most significant trading partners of the U.S. in the CIS. In 2011, the bilateral trade turnover amounted to \$2.8 billion with the positive balance on the Azerbaijani side. So, in 2010, Azerbaijan signed a contract with Boeing – worth US\$1 billion – for the purchase of eight civilian airplanes. This contract helped support more than 11,000 American jobs across the United States.

Azerbaijan has been designated as a beneficiary country under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) program, under which a range of products that Azerbaijan might seek to export are eligible for duty-free entry to the United States. The GSP program provides an incentive for investors to produce in Azerbaijan and export selected products duty-free to the U.S. market.

The State Oil Fund of Azerbaijan has invested approximately US\$3 billion in the United States, including in U.S. Treasury, Federal Home Loan Bank, Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac bonds, as well as U.S. corporate bonds and equities.

Diplomatic Relations

Azerbaijan is a member of the United Nations, the Non-Aligned Movement, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, NATO's Partnership for Peace, the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, the World Health Organization, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development; the Council of Europe, CFE Treaty, the Community of Democracies; the International Monetary Fund; and the World Bank.



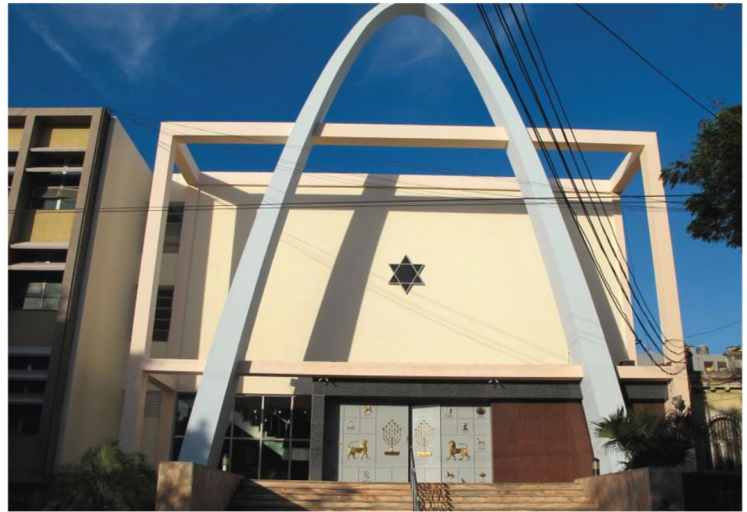
Elmar Mammadyarov, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan

The major trends in the foreign relations of Azerbaijan toward both global and regional powers active in Caucasus area. External variables are categorized depending on their original nature into two groups: global and regional. The former category includes global players such as Moscow and Washington, while the latter category rival regional players, namely Ankara and Tehran.

Azerbaijan has a new image of an emerging donor country that delivers its aid to the people affected by natural and man-made disasters in different parts of the world, as well as to the countries facing economic difficulties. Azerbaijan International Development Agency (AIDA) was established on 14 September 2011 under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan. The main purpose in establishing the Agency was to support the efforts of international community in addressing social problems around the world. The dynamic economic development of the Republic of Azerbaijan over the last decade has enabled a former recipient of foreign aid to become itself a donor country.

Relations with Israel

Azerbaijan and Israel have developed an increasingly close relationship over the past two decades. Israel opened an embassy in Baku in the early 1990s. Azerbaijan has yet to open an embassy in Israel. In August 1997, then-Prime Minister of Israel Benjamin Netanyahu visited Baku. Israeli Deputy Prime Minister Navaf Masalha visited Baku in January 2001, to meet with President Heydar Aliyev and other high-ranking officials. Azerbaijan has also developed close intelligence and security cooperation with Israel.



Main synagogue of Quba, Azerbaijan

Israeli business in Azerbaijan has grown alongside diplomatic relations. Four Azerbaijani cabinet members visited Israel in 2005 and in May 2007, Likud Knesset faction chairman Gideon Sa'ar and three other Knesset members visited Azerbaijan.

In July 2009, Israeli President Shimon Peres led an official visit to Baku, and announced plans to share technological and scientific assets with Azerbaijan.

In April 2012, Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman visited Baku to discuss Israeli-Azerbaijani cooperation.

In December 2016, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu visited Baku, making Azerbaijan the first stop during his trip to Muslim countries. President Aliyev and Prime Minister Netanyahu discussed military cooperation and made a nearly \$5 billion deal for Azerbaijan to purchase Israeli defense systems.

The intergovernmental commission between the two countries was established in December 2016. The commission is headed by Minister of Taxes Mikayil Jabbarov from the Azerbaijani side, and by Minister of Ecology, Minister of Jerusalem Affairs and Heritage Elkin Zeev from the Israeli side.

The first meeting of the intergovernmental commission was held in Jerusalem in May 2018.

Jewish Community

Jewish relations with other ethnic and religious communities in Azerbaijan are positive, and the Jewish community enjoys warm relations with the Azerbaijani government.

The first Jews of Azerbaijan settled in the Caucasus Mountains, possibly as early as the late Roman era. Known as Mountain Jews, or Tats, they lived in the mountains until the 18th and 19th centuries, when most moved to the Azerbaijani lowlands and became farmers. Tats spoke a distinct Jewish dialect called Judeo-Tat (Judeo-Persian), a language that remained unwritten until the Soviet era. European Ashkenazi Jews arrived in Azerbaijan in the 19th century during Imperial Russian rule.



Entrance of the main synagogue of Quba, Azerbaijan

Many Jews emigrated after the Soviet Union's collapse, fleeing war and poverty. Communities of 500 or fewer remain in a number of smaller towns. Currently, the total population of Jews is 15,000-20,000, and most reside in Baku and Quba, which was a center for Jewish learning prior to 1917. The Krasnaya Sloboda section of Quba still has its own Jewish center and synagogue and officially adheres to the Jewish calendar. A state school in Krasnaya Sloboda educates Muslim, Jewish, and Russian students. It is the only school in the country to teach minority languages, and students learn about both Muslim and Jewish holidays. In 2006, Baku State University opened its first Hebrew language department.

In 2003, Chabad opened the first national Jewish school in the country to be recognized by the Azerbaijani government. Other schools in Baku and Quba include a state-subsidized day school and a Jewish College, which operates under the authority of the Vaad HaHatzolah of New York.

In 2010 a new Chabad Ohr Avner Educational Complex opened in Baku.

There are 10-15 Jewish organizations in Baku, including the Baku Religious Community of European Jews, a Jewish Women's Organization, a War Veterans' Society, the Azerbaijan-Israel Friendship Organization, and the Chavva Welfare Center for Women and Children. The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC/ "Joint") runs a Jewish kindergarten, a community center, a Chesed charity center, and a Hillel student center. The Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI/ "Sochnut") conducts

Jewish Community (Cont.)

programs in the city, including a Hebrew-language ulpan, a children's winter camp, a parents' club, and a program to prepare candidates for aliyah (immigration to Israel).

Five synagogues operate in Azerbaijan, including three in Baku. In 2003, a new synagogue opened in Baku, the first one to be built in Azerbaijan in nearly a century. The opening ceremony, sponsored in part by the Baku Religious Community of European Jews, brought together broad diplomatic, governmental, and faith community representation, including NCSEJ.

In 2011 a new synagogue for Mountain Jews of Azerbaijan opened, built by the Government of Azerbaijan. The opening ceremony was attended by government officials, representatives of various religious communities of Azerbaijan, and foreign ambassadors.

In September 2019 the statue of a national hero of Azerbaijan Albert Agarunov, a Jewish- Azerbaijani who defended the Nagorno-Karabakh region and fought to retake the town of Shusha from Armenian control has been established in Baku.



Albert Agarunov

Anti-Semitism

Few anti-Semitic attacks have occurred, including physical assaults and desecrations of synagogues and cemeteries, and have been thoroughly investigated by the authorities.

In recent years, the main manifestations of anti-Semitism in Azerbaijan have been connected with Islamist activities and solidarity with Palestinian Muslims.

In 2010, a series of anti-Israel demonstrations took place in Baku and other cities, as a reaction to the stoppage of the flagship *Mari Marmara* on its way to Gaza. However, a number of these demonstrations were not authorized by the administration, and the police stopped an attempt to protest in front of the Embassy of Israel.