

AZERBAIJAN

**A Quarter Century Since
Restoring Independence, A Thriving U.S. Ally**

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From tragedy to independence

How Azerbaijan turned a 1990 massacre into freedom



Courtesy of The Fletcher School/John Davis Photography

By Elin Suleymanov

Twenty-five years ago this month, while President George H.W. Bush was delivering his State of the Union message before a joint session of Congress, Soviet troops attacked unarmed civilian protesters in the Azerbaijani capital of Baku, killing some 133 people and wounding hundreds of others. The Soviet effort to crush the growing Azerbaijani pro-independence movement culminated in the largest massacre in a generation, but it failed miserably, hastened the end of the Soviet Union and led directly to our formal declaration of independence two years later.

The events of 1990 helped crystallize key elements of the Azerbaijani social and political identity. Two of those

elements, namely a strong, unquestionable commitment to its independence and the inclusive nature of its tolerant society, remain at the core of Azerbaijan's strategic importance. Despite a history of imperial domination, the people of Azerbaijan persevered, sacrificed and ultimately won the freedom and independent future they sought. In fact, Azerbaijan was the first nation of the Soviet empire or Eastern Europe to become free of any foreign military presence on its soil.

Independence has given Azerbaijan the ability to act in the best interest of our own people without outside interference. Azerbaijan's strengths today include energy security, a growing economy, modern infrastructure and a remarkable degree of stability. Independence has allowed us to pursue and achieve our peoples' centuries-long dream of a prosperous and successful nation. This is no small accomplishment anywhere, but especially in the complicated geopolitical neighborhood in which we are located.

Azerbaijan is a reliable international partner. History has shown that unstable nations with compromised sovereignty pose the greatest threat to peace and security while stable, prosperous societies committed to the fundamentals of international law promote peace and establish the basis for continued democratic reforms. A stable, prosperous Azerbaijan is good for its people, for the strategically important region in which it finds



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itself, and for its international partners.

A people who have struggled and suffered in their quest for freedom and independence guard both. These people demonstrated their commitment to these aspirations 25 years ago. The Soviet troops who shot and killed so many citizens of Azerbaijan indiscriminately that day gunned down a diverse group of freedom lovers, including Azerbaijanis, Russians, Tatars, Jews and others. People of all ethnicities and faiths were killed by the troops of a collapsing Soviet empire that night, and people of all faiths and ethnicities of Azerbaijan came to mourn the victims. Led by Azerbaijan's Christian, Jewish and Muslim denominations, 1 million people marched in Baku on a cold January day in 1990 in a spectacular act of defiance against a Soviet army-imposed curfew.

On that day a quarter-century ago, an independent nation was reborn. In today's world, where differences seem to matter more than common humanity, Azerbaijan's vision of inclusive intercultural dialogue enriched by the experience of creating in 1918 the first-ever democratic republic with a predominantly Muslim population sets a valuable global example.

This tradition continues under Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev. The nation's commitment to inclusiveness and openness is widely recognized in the world, be it among the Muslim nations, by the Vatican or by Israel, an important partner of Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan's passionate devotion to meaningful independence and rejection of radicalism is sometimes misunderstood. It is easy enough for those who don't live in our neighborhood to fault us for not acting precisely as they might like, but it is dangerous and foolish to simply ignore the map of the world or to minimize the value of stable and independent allies in our region. There are even some in the West, including the U.S. Commission on Religious Freedom, who continue to view religious radicalism as some sort of theoretical problem rather than a truly dangerous global threat with which those who live in our region must contend. While we appreciate constructive criticism and advice, the driving force behind our policies and strong partnership with the United States will remain the choices, desires and interests of our people.

For a quarter-century, every Jan. 20 citizens of Azerbaijan of all persuasions bring red carnations to the memorial of the tragedy. It is, however, a truly independent, successful and diverse Azerbaijan that is the best tribute to the sacrifices of those who died on the streets of Baku at the hands of a collapsing Soviet regime.

Elin Suleymanov is Azerbaijan's ambassador to the United States.



Why Azerbaijan matters to the United States



By Rep. Randy Weber

Why would a relatively stable country at the intersection of the Middle East, Europe and Asia, with a strong economy and burgeoning energy supply, matter to the United States? It's a great question with a relatively easy answer. In 1991, Azerbaijan gained its independence from the Soviet Union and has since proven to be a strong strategic partner to the United States

as an energy producer, a staunch opponent of Russia and Iran, and a reliable international ally.

A sensible energy policy is multi-pronged, and Azerbaijan is part of that equation, especially in relation to the discussion on neutralizing Russia. Early on, Azerbaijan opened its rich oil and gas resources to foreign investment from companies from Europe and the United States. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline originating in Azerbaijan, currently exports roughly 1 million barrels of oil per day. The proposed Trans-Caspian Gas pipeline, however, is currently in a holding pattern because of opposition from Iran and Russia. Both pipelines will ultimately be the region's great equalizer. This energy supply will help Europe finally relinquish its reliance on Russian oil and gas.

Pipeline infrastructure is critically important for the energy security of the United States and Europe, and is the most efficient method of transporting fossil fuels. The United States should play a positive role in efforts to support the construction of this project so that Azerbaijan will be able to get more of its product to European consumers in search of relief from

Russian energy supplies. Too often Russia has used its dominate position in the energy markets as a weapon to bully its neighbors. It has raised gas prices indiscriminately in Eastern European nations and has even blocked shipments in the dead of winter.

Not only has Azerbaijan played an important role in the global energy market, but they have also been a strategic partner in matters of global security. As we have seen in recent months, terrorist regimes have reared their ugly head, looking to destabilize the region or even launch attacks against American interests. Azerbaijan is strategically located in the epicenter of where most of the hostile and politically-unstable countries are located, and where acts of terrorism are common. And yet, this majority Shiite Muslim nation counts Israel among one of its closest allies. Azerbaijan provides up to 40 percent of Israel's oil imports, and in return, acquires advanced military equipment, anti-aircraft and missile defense systems, as well as drones from Israel.

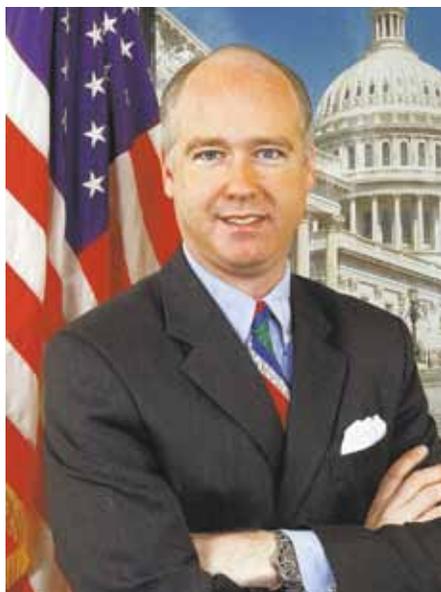
Bordering both Russia and Iran and a critical gateway to Afghanistan, Azerbaijan has also been a strategic transit location for U.S. military troops,

equipment and supplies. The country provides a secure transit route for 40 percent of the NATO International Security Forces operating in Afghanistan. United States and Azeri military continue to work side-by-side in training Afghani police, border guards, and civilian and military doctors. Additionally, cooperation between the two countries extends into efforts to counter international terror, nuclear proliferation and narcotics trafficking.

Now, more than ever, we must strengthen our current relationships with allies new and old. Azerbaijan has continually shown their willingness to cooperate with our government to foster a healthier, more stable Middle East and Eurasia. It is imperative for the future of our national security that we continue down a path of collaboration and show that we will be a strong and strategic partner to Azerbaijan for years to come.

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Rep. Randy Weber is a Republican who represents the 14th District of Texas in the U.S. House of Representatives and serves on the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

Azerbaijan: A Strategic American Ally That Must Receive Our Full Support



By Rep. Robert Aderholt

In the middle of Eurasia sits the Caucasus Mountains, flowing down to the Caspian Sea. And on the West Shore of the Caspian sits a small and very important country named Azerbaijan. This country sits between

Russia to the North, Iran to the South and the Caspian Sea to the East. Azerbaijan is of particular importance since it holds the rights to significant reserves of oil and gas in the region. All of which makes this small country very strategically important to the West.

As a Member of Congress who sits on a number of committees and organizations dealing directly or indirectly with international issues, I have had the opportunity to visit Azerbaijan on a couple of occasions. On those trips I have met with President Ilham Aliyev, as well as opposition leaders. The country's commitment to the West, coupled with its location between Asia and Eastern Europe, makes it of extreme importance to the interest of freedom and the hopes for democracy in the region. It also puts the nation in a position to feel threatened from its neighbors. With Russia's backing of rebels in Ukraine and President Putin's annexation of Crimea, we have reasons to be concerned about Azerbaijan's future as well.

The government of Azerbaijan has

been very clear in its opposition to the Russian meddling in Ukraine. In fact, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Moldova were the only post-Soviet States to vote against Russian aggression in the UN Security Council last year. Azerbaijan has a history of standing with the U.S. and its allies for the good of the world community.

However if Azerbaijan were to find itself at the end of the barrel of Russian aggression, I believe President Obama's handling of the situation in Ukraine gives us all great concern over what the Administration's response would be. I fear that from past experiences, the response would amount to strong words and not much action. President Obama has laid down several red lines in the past as a response to world conflicts, and many times we have seen the U.S. retreat when those lines were ultimately crossed. President Putin has made it clear by his actions, that if he wants something, he will do what is necessary to attain it.

We must support and be willing to backup the people of Azerbaijan, not

just because it's in our interests to do so, but because they have also supported us in some of our darkest days. After the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, Azerbaijan committed its military personnel and put them on the ground in Afghanistan to support Operation Enduring Freedom. How could we possibly turn our backs on them after committing their national treasure to support us in our fight against radical Islam?

A more stable and prosperous Azerbaijan promises a more stable and prosperous Caucasus region. This is why it is so important the Obama Administration uphold our American values, ideals and morals and not undercut and undermine our strategic relationship with the government and people of Azerbaijan.

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Rep. Robert Aderholt is a Republican who represents Alabama's 4th District in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Azerbaijan's rich history with Jewish settlers opened door to Israel alliance

Rare Muslim country to befriend Tel Aviv

BY THE WASHINGTON TIMES

If one wonders how the majority Muslim country of Azerbaijan came to such a rich alliance with Israel today, one need look no further than the Red Village, a tiny river conclave in the mountainous region of Quba. There, for centuries, a Jewish community has thrived amid a Muslim population.

Today about 5,000 Jews have settled in the village, which boasts three schools and three synagogues. And the language of Hebrew, the artifacts of the Jewish faith and the rich tapestry of Azerbaijani woven carpets all blend together in a lasting tribute to the cultural tolerance this country has achieved.

Arye Gut, an Israeli scholar of Azerbaijani descent, wrote a recent essay describing the unique atmosphere of multiculturalism that has blossomed in the former Soviet republic.

That bond of trust has grown over the centuries, and today has translated into a larger diplomatic alliance between Azerbaijan and Israel that began a quarter of a century ago. Israel opened the door in late 1991, with one of the first declarations in the world recognizing Azerbaijan as an independent country after the fall of the Soviet Union.

Diplomatic and economic ties grew rapidly over the years, as both countries shared a deep concern about Iran's efforts to export Islamist extremism and develop nuclear weapons. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made the first official state visit to Baku in 1997 in a sign of how warm relations between the two countries were becoming.

Commerce and trade flourished, with Israel becoming a major importer of Azerbaijan oil and Israel's technology industry aiding Baku with such projects as telecommunications infrastructure.

Increased security ties have followed in the years since. Shortly after the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks in



“Respect and tolerance for national minorities has played a vital role in the development of the country from antiquity to the days of the Silk Road to modernity. Minorities, as well as women, have been ubiquitous in Azerbaijani government since its independence from the Soviet Union,” he noted in his essay in *The Hill* newspaper.

“Azerbaijan has made a concerted effort to create and foster the necessary political and social conditions for developing and strengthening the country's traditions of multiculturalism and tolerance,” he added. “Time and again, Azerbaijan has demonstrated that harmony is possible, and issues can be resolved without resorting to violence or strife.”

Legend has it that Jewish settlers first reached the Quba region back in the 13th century. But the cementing of two cultures really took root in 1742, when the leader of Quba, Huseynali Khan, and his son, Feteli, gave their blessing to Jewish settlers to form a permanent community. The Khans offered their protection to the village, vowing that any attack seen from across the river would summon an army of protection.

America, Israel and Azerbaijan declared they shared a common interest in fighting global terrorism, and they forged an intelligence and security alliance that has flourished over the last decade.

That alliance led to the thwarting of a major terror attack planned in 2008 by extremists on the Israeli embassy in Baku and the arrests of 22 people accused of plotting attacks in 2012 against Israeli and U.S. interests in Azerbaijan.

In 2009 Israeli President Shimon Peres also visited Baku, launching a new era of cooperation. And in 2013 Mr. Peres welcomed a high-ranking Azeri delegation to his country to talk about the shared concerns a nuclearized Iran posed for the world.

The Israeli president's comments that day offered a succinct explanation of how two seemingly odd bedfellows became such strong global allies.

“I know the policy of Azerbaijan is of peace, friendship, development but also of independence. With your unique geographic location, there is no doubt that you already are, and will continue to be, a key country in this part of the world. Azerbaijan takes a clear stand against terror, against war,” the Israeli leader explained.

Azerbaijan Congressional Caucus

BY THE WASHINGTON TIMES

More than five dozen members of the U.S. House of Representatives are members of the Congressional Azerbaijan Caucus, which was formed a decade ago to expand bilateral relations and improve congressional understanding about this key U.S. ally in the Caspian Sea region.

Since its founding in 2004 by then-Reps. Curt Weldon, Pennsylvania Republican, and Solomon Ortiz, Texas Democrat, the caucus has arranged several congressional delegations to visit Azerbaijan.

The caucus has educated members on Caspian energy and the geopolitics of Eurasia, and helped advocate expanded strategic relations between the United States and the Republic of Azerbaijan on such critical issues as trade, security and military cooperation.

The current members of the caucus at the end of the 113th Congress:

Adam Kinzinger (R-IL)

Al Green (D-TX)

Alcee Hastings (D-FL)

Allyson Schwartz (D-PA)

Bill Shuster (R-PA)
(Co-chair of the Caucus)

Bill Cassidy (R-LA)

Collin Peterson (D-MN)

Corrine Brown (D-FL)

Darrell Issa (R-CA)

Ed Whitfield (R-KY)

Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX)

Eni Faleomavaega (D-AS)

Frank LoBiondo (R-NJ)

Gene Green (D-TX)

Gerald Connolly (D-VA)

Glenn Thompson (R-PA)

Howard Coble (R-NC)

Jim Moran (D-VA)

Joe Barton (R-TX)

Joe Wilson (R-SC)

John Boozman (R-AR)

John J. Duncan, Jr. (R-TN)

Joseph Pitts (R-PA)

Luis Guitierrez (D-IL)

Madeleine Bordallo (D-Guam)

Mike Conaway (R-TX)

Nick Rahall (D-WV)

Nydia Velazquez (D-NY)

Pete Sessions (R-TX)

Peter King (R-NY)

Ralph Hall (R-TX)

Randy Hultgren (R-IL)

Randy Weber (R-TX)

Robert Wittman (R-VA)

Rodney Alexander (R-LA)

Ruben Hinojosa (D-TX)

Sheila Jackson Lee (D-TX)

Shelly Moore Capito (R-WV)

Steve Cohen (D-TN)
(Co-chair of the Caucus)

Tim Ryan (D-OH)

Todd Young (R-IN)

Tom Cole (R-OK)

Virginia Foxx (R-NC)

Mark Meadows (R-NC)

Jim Bridenstine (R-OK)

Filemon Vela (D-TX)

Luke Messer (R-IN)

Leonard Lance (R-NJ)

Gregory Meeks (D-NY)

Marc Veasey (D-TX)

Mike Turner (R-OH)

John Yarmuth (D-KY)

Henry Cuellar (D-TX)

Robert Aderholt (R-AL)

Ted Poe (R-TX)

Michelle Grisham (D-NM)

Pete Gallego (D-TX)

Pete Olson (R-TX)

Charlie Dent (R-PA)

Matt Salmon (R-AZ)

Doug Collins (R-GA)

Qırmızı Qəsəbə

RED VILLAGE: JEWISH HERITAGE OF AZERBAIJAN

Red Village (Qırmızı Qəsəbə) sits across a river from Guba, larger town of Azerbaijan famous throughout the Caucasus for its woven rugs. Red Village is inhabited almost exclusively by Mountain Jews, between 2,000 and 5,000 of them, according to various estimates. Red Village, with three schools and three synagogues, is the most densely populated area of mountain Jews in the world for their number. Inside Red Village's main synagogue, the only sign of difference is when visitors are asked to remove their shoes, as in a mosque, and the floor of the shul's rich wooden interior is covered in Azerbaijani carpets.

While the Highland Jews had been in the area around Quba since at least the 13th century, the formal creation of Red Village is traced back to the 18th century, when in 1742 the khan of Quba, Huseynali Khan and later his son Feteli Khan, gave the Jews permission to set up a community free of persecution across the river from the city of Quba. According to locals, Feteli Khan, decreed that if anyone came to attack the town, the Jews should light fires and he would see them from across the river and send help to defend the inhabitants.



In 1938-1939, Red Village was populated by 12,000-13,000 Jews. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the population immigrated mostly to Israel and the United States, but did not abandon the settlement completely. In the summer nearly all the émigrés return to spend some time in their hometown.

Mountain Jews in Azerbaijan are divided into 3 local groups: **Guba people**, settled mainly in Red Village of Guba region of Azerbaijan, **Oghuz people**, settled in Oguz, Ganja, Ismayilli, Goychay and Shamakhi cities of Azerbaijan, and **Shirvan people**, settled in the north-east of Azerbaijan, the former Meji village of Shamakhi and Baku, capital of Azerbaijan.

Unlike the more European, Ashkenazi Jews of the former Soviet Union, who largely stopped practicing religion, Mountain Jews clung as tenaciously to their faith as their villages have clung to the rocky Caucasus terrain. Over the years, they borrowed customs from their amiable Muslim neighbors, but never assimilated. Even as their knowledge of the rituals seeped away, they adhered to the broad outlines of Judaism, faithfully attending Sabbath prayers, scrubbing their homes on Fridays and baking their own matzo on Passover.



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FACTS ABOUT AZERBAIJAN

Location:	Southeastern Europe, bordering the Caspian Sea, between Iran and Russia, with a small European portion north of the Caucasus range
Map References:	Eastern Europe
Area:	Total: 86,600 sq km
Comparative Area:	Slightly smaller than Maine
Land Boundaries:	Total: 2,013 km
Border Countries:	Armenia (with Azerbaijan-proper) 566 km, Armenia (with Azerbaijan-Naxcivan exclave) 221 km, Georgia 322 km, Iran (with Azerbaijan-proper) 432 km, Iran (with Azerbaijan-Naxcivan exclave) 179 km, Russia 284 km, Turkey 9 km
Coastline:	0 km (landlocked); note - Azerbaijan borders the Caspian Sea (713 km)
Maritime Claims:	None (landlocked)
Terrain:	Large, flat Kur-Araz Ovaligi (Kura-Araks Lowland, much of it below sea level) with Great Caucasus Mountains to the north, Qarabag Yaylasi (Karabakh Upland) in west; Baku lies on Abseron Yasaqligi (Apsheron Peninsula) that juts into Caspian Sea.
Elevation Extremes:	Lowest point: Caspian Sea -28 m
Highest Point:	Bazarduzu Dagi 4,485 m
Natural Resources:	Petroleum, natural gas, iron ore, nonferrous metals, bauxite
Land Use:	Arable land: 21.78%
Irrigated Land:	14,250 sq km (2010)
Per Capita:	1,384 cu m/yr (2010)

Rep. Turner champions Azerbaijan, Southern Gas Corridor as key to geopolitical stability



BY THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Rep. Michael R. Turner, R-Ohio, has been one of the most cogent voices on Capitol Hill in educating his colleagues about the importance of Azerbaijan as a strategic U.S. ally. And as chairman of the U.S. Delegation to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization Parliamentary Assembly, his voice is closely heeded.

Mr. Turner in 2013 paved the way for a bipartisan resolution putting the U.S. House of Representatives on

record that it is in the U.S. national interest to support the Southern Gas Corridor, a pipeline project that would help send natural gas from Azerbaijan to key allies across Europe to lessen their energy dependence on Russia and other countries.

The Shah Deniz field in Azerbaijan is one of the world's largest gas fields, with over 30 trillion cubic feet of recoverable gas.

In a statement on the House floor, Mr. Turner explained why the pipeline project was more than an economic opportunity for the Caspian Sea region.

"The Southern Gas Corridor will contribute to regional energy security for our allies in Europe and Eurasia, and help to strengthen our strategic partnership. Many of our allies are reliant upon natural gas supplies from a single nation or unstable regions. Ensuring our allies have access to an alternative and reliable source of energy will help improve geopolitical stability in the region," he said.

Mr. Turner, a member of the Azerbaijan Congressional Caucus, also has frequently highlighted Azerbaijan's direct assistance to the United States

since winning its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Azerbaijan has unequivocally joined the war against terrorism, become one of the few Muslim countries to openly support Israel and given America a reliable intelligence and military ally sandwiched between Iran and Russia, he has said.

"The ongoing unrest in Ukraine is a stark reminder that the United States must enhance our strategic partnerships as a buffer against Russia's intentions," he noted in one speech praise.

In a floor speech last May commemorating the 96th anniversary of the country's founding, Mr. Turner praised Azerbaijan for its willingness to engage America and to spread its energy wealth across Europe to create stability in turbulent times.

"Azerbaijan continues to be an important partner with the United States in counter-terrorism efforts and initiatives to bolster energy security with strategic allies. With its vast resources of oil and gas, Azerbaijan is a key component to help our strategic allies in NATO and other European countries diversify their energy resources," he noted.

America's new ambassador to Azerbaijan: Robert F. Cekuta

BY THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Shortly before leaving for holiday recess, the U.S. Senate approved the nomination of Robert F. Cekuta, a career foreign service diplomat with expertise in international energy issues, to be the new American ambassador to the Republic of Azerbaijan.

Mr. Cekuta arrives in his new post after serving the last three years as the State Department's principal deputy assistant secretary in charge of the Bureau of Energy Resources, and is regarded as an expert in energy issues as well as democratic and free market reforms.

He was a key player in the formation of the new Energy Bureau, where he developed programs advancing global energy security, fighting corruption and building good governance and accountability in oil and gas production, the department said.



From 2010 to 2011 Mr. Cekuta served as deputy assistant secretary for energy, sanctions and commodities in the Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs at the Department of State, and previously worked as a

senior adviser in the department for food security issues.

Over his two-decade career, Mr. Cekuta has served in numerous overseas posts including Kabul, Afghanistan; Tokyo, Japan; Berlin, Germany; Tirana, Albania; Vienna, Austria; Baghdad, Iraq; and Johannesburg, South Africa.

Mr. Cekuta earned his bachelor's degree at Georgetown University in 1976 and master's degrees from Thunderbird School of Global Management in 1978 and the National Defense University in 1994.

He is the recipient of numerous awards, including eight Senior Performance Awards, four Superior Honor Awards and five Meritorious Honor Awards. He speaks German, Albanian and Arabic, the department said.

He was nominated by President Obama in July to the ambassadorship and confirmed by the Senate in a voice vote on Dec. 16.

Azerbaijan: America's reliable partner

By S. Rob Sobhani

A few weeks ago in France, a bastion of democracy, Islamic radicals deliberately targeted a kosher supermarket and killed four Jews. In the frequently criticized Republic of Azerbaijan, Jews celebrated another Sabbath and prayed at Baku's newly built synagogue. The synagogue, one of the largest outside Israel, was opened in this Muslim nation of 8 million at a ceremony attended by the Chief Rabbi of Israel. And yet, despite this glaring contrast, some in our media and foreign policy elite continue to single out Azerbaijan's leadership for criticism.

A better measure of how Washington should treat one of America's most reliable allies in the broader Middle East is to ask whether Azeri President Ilham Aliyev is delivering on his dual promises of prosperity for his people and cooperation with the West. In a nutshell, does the leader of this secular Muslim country sandwiched between America's archrivals Iran and Russia practice good



governance? The short answer is yes.

As President Obama laments the shrinking American middle class, President Aliyev celebrates 12 consecutive years of double-digit economic growth. This has meant a growing middle class with the purchasing power to act as an engine for dynamic growth. On numerous occasions President Aliyev has indicated that growing Azerbaijan's middle class is his top priority. This growing middle class will allow for the gradual opening of the political space.

While America's leaders have failed the American people in creating good-paying jobs because of misguided economic policies, labor participation rates in Azerbaijan hover above 80



percent. In other words, able-bodied men and women who want to enter the job market in Azerbaijan have little difficulty, because most construction sites, entry-level private sector jobs and even energy sector opportunities are offered first to the citizens of Azerbaijan.

According to the World Bank, poverty rates have fallen dramatically in Azerbaijan. This is a direct result of a pledge Mr. Aliyev made when he first became president — namely, to eradicate the “shame and stain” of poverty. Our elite and those in the foreign policy establishment that point the finger at Azerbaijan should spend more time figuring out how we can eliminate the stubborn poverty levels we see in our own country before criticizing President Aliyev.

America's 4 million-word tax code is a monument to the corruption of a political system that allows well-connected lobbyists for companies to carve out corporate welfare for their clients. In Azerbaijan the tax code is simple: Incomes below \$39,000 are taxed at 14 percent and those above this amount pay 25 percent. Does this mean that Azerbaijan is immune from corruption? No. And does this mean that the country needs to do more to combat corruption at home? Yes it does. But until we clean up our own act at home by giving the American people a transparent, flat tax system, it may be better not to criticize one of our strongest allies in the fight against global terrorism.

Most importantly for future generations of Azerbaijanis, President Aliyev has made it very clear that his country's debt-to-GDP ratio must not exceed 22 percent. (It currently stands at below 10 percent.) In short, Mr. Aliyev has not saddled his country's youth with massive debt. Sadly, we cannot make the same claim in America, where our leaders have continued to spend to the tune of an \$18 trillion debt.

On his pledge of cooperation with the West, Ilham Aliyev has been a man of his word. His country stood by the United

States immediately after the attacks of Sept. 11 and sent troops to Afghanistan and Iraq to fight alongside America's servicemen and -women. In addition, Mr. Aliyev has proved a reliable energy partner to the West by providing an uninterrupted flow of oil and gas from the Caspian basin. Unlike his neighbors to the north and south — Russia and Iran — Mr. Aliyev does not use his nation's energy resources as a weapon. In fact, Russia's Crimean land grab may never have happened had Washington given its unwavering support to President Aliyev for delivery of gas from Azerbaijan to Ukraine. A Ukraine not dependent

on Russian gas could have stood up to Moscow had our foreign policy focused on strengthening its ties to the most reliable energy exporter in the region: Azerbaijan.

The key question members of the new Congress should ask themselves is not whether Azerbaijan is a liberal democracy but rather whether President Aliyev practices good governance. In short, has he provided the fundamental rights of security, peace, quality education, economic growth, poverty reduction and job creation for his people? And, furthermore, has Mr. Aliyev kept his promise of standing by the West in its fight against global jihadis and been a reliable energy partner? The answer on all counts is a resounding yes.

American foreign policy must always include our cherished values of freedom and human rights. And yet those same values must also be balanced by the realities of an increasingly dangerous world. At a time when America needs reliable friends on the global stage, we cannot afford to alienate our friends who have stood by us shoulder to shoulder. Azerbaijan is one such country and deserves America's gratitude.

S. Rob Sobhani, Ph.D. is CEO of Caspian Group Holdings, an occasional columnist for *The Washington Times* and a former candidate for U.S. Senate in Maryland.

Azerbaijan Airlines expands to New York, Berlin and Tel Aviv



By THE WASHINGTON TIMES

There are many signs of Azerbaijan's growing economic prowess, but none more visible than the expanding footprint of its main airlines

Azerbaijan Airlines last September began its first regular flights between Baku and New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport, and the flight's success has expanded the route now to three times a week.

With the first-ever European Games set to debut in June in Baku, the airlines this month also announced it has started its first ever regular flights to Berlin, Germany, an expansion of its reach across Europe.

And in a sign of the growing friendship between Azerbaijan and Israel, the airlines announced it has expanded its flights to and from Tel Aviv to twice a week.

Time for consistent U.S. policy toward Azerbaijan in a post-Soviet world

By Alex Vatanka

At a time when the direction of America's foreign policy is generating abundant global bewilderment, policymakers in Congress and the administration must be mindful not to alienate more allies and increase doubt and distrust of America's promises.

Azerbaijan, a pro-American, secular Muslim and energy-rich nation of some 9 million people on the shores of the Caspian Sea, is one of those countries. Authorities in Baku are increasingly speculating about Washington's commitment to its strategic allies and its own stated values. Some of America's latest policy maneuverings, including an inconsistent and largely toothless response to Russia's actions in Ukraine, have not helped alleviate Baku's fears.

Since its independence upon the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the former Soviet republic of Azerbaijan has considered the United States as one of its principal strategic partners. This conscious, but at times hazardous, choice to turn to Washington was, from the outset, rooted in a belief in American strength and a hope in Washington's fairness in mediating among disputing nations. It was a conviction that drove successive Azerbaijani governments to accept American arbitration in Baku's conflict with neighboring Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, an Azerbaijani region occupied by Armenian forces since the end of a war in 1994.

For 20 years Azerbaijan has patiently stuck to this belief in America as the foolproof arbiter that will somehow and someday help engineer a peaceful resolution to this frozen conflict in the South Caucasus. Increasingly, however, the Azerbaijanis question whether the United States prioritizes short-term goals over long-term objectives of peacemaking and the upholding of key American values, including respect for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of nations.

Azerbaijan's anxieties about Congress and the administration's stance on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict recently surfaced again following Russia's annexation of Crimea in March. Officials in Baku quickly grasped the possible impact of Moscow's actions on the fate of other forcefully annexed territories, including Azerbaijan's Nagorno-Karabakh region. In a bold step that could have not failed to irk its larger neighbor, Azerbaijan voted



against Moscow in a U.N. vote that called the annexation of Crimea an illegal act, while many of the post-Soviet states abstained, and Armenia, along with only 10 other questionable nations, voted against the West.

The Azerbaijanis have since also eagerly watched America's posture toward Moscow in the hope that Washington will lead a broader push to stop Russian intimidation of her smaller neighbors and Moscow's disregard for the territorial integrity of other countries. At a minimum, Baku had hoped that the United States would adhere to the same principles when adopting policies to deal with international territorial disputes. American policymakers in Congress and the executive, however, seem more preoccupied with scoring symbolic geopolitical points against Moscow than applying international laws on the question of territorial integrity of states.

This was the case with a recent American measure at the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Parliamentary Assembly in Baku. Last July, Sen. Benjamin L. Cardin, Maryland Democrat, introduced a resolution that condemned Russian annexation of Crimea. Russia predictably voted against the resolution, and pro-U.S. Azerbaijan, which hosted the event, was not enthusiastic about the measure either. The territorial integrity of Ukraine is important, the Azerbaijanis argued, but a selective approach by the international community to territorial disputes will, in the long run, only make a mockery of international law.

Mr. Cardin's resolution was a mere knee-jerk reaction to a phenomenon — the disregard for territorial integrity

of states — that impacts a number of post-Soviet states. It is not just Ukraine and Azerbaijan, but also an issue that Georgia and Moldova are wrestling to address. Along with Azerbaijan, the resolution failed to mention Georgia and Moldova as well. As the head of the Azerbaijani delegation, Bakhar Muradova, put it, a "serious resolution, which would concern all conflicts in

the region," will have been far more fitting given American leadership.

Incidentally, such a selective approach, best demonstrated by the EU's refusal to emphasize Azerbaijan's territorial integrity in its proposed association agreement with Azerbaijan, is in stark difference with agreements offered to Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine — and one reason why Baku is still hesitant to move forward with the EU association.

It is one thing to pursue a muddled foreign policy that leaves U.S. allies puzzled; it is an entirely different proposition — and with potential grave consequences for America's global leverage — when Washington's policies foster a sense of American double standards or its undependability as a partner.

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Azerbaijan singled out at Davos for sports leadership, economic growth

By THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Azerbaijan was one of the darlings at the just-completed World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, where officials hailed the former Soviet republic for its economic growth and its commitment to global sports competition.

The country received significant attention for its efforts to host the first-ever European Games this June in Baku. President Ilham Aliyev and Minister of Youth and Sports Azad Rahimov, who also serves as chief executive of the Baku 2015 games, led a delegation to the annual event in Davos. They also hosted a dinner gala celebrating the upcoming sports competition.

Patrick Hickey, president of the European Olympic Committees, and Klaus Schwab, executive chairman of the World Economic Forum, celebrated Azerbaijan for its economic growth and its growing presence on the world stage

just 23 years after winning its independence from the Soviet Union.

"This year's theme in Davos is 'The New Global Context,' a theme which is also reflective of the sports movement in 2015. Sport in Europe is not only embracing a new context; it is helping to create a new context — through the introduction of the European Games," Mr. Hickey told the dinner.

"Baku will stage a fantastic first edition. Azerbaijan is a nation emerging at a rapid pace, and with an abundance of natural resources combined with efficient management, it has become a remarkably dynamic state in just 23 years," he said. "Being part of the European Olympic family has helped accelerate this development. Sport occupies a special place in Azerbaijan's society."

Mr. Rahimov said the Baku 2015 Games weren't just a single event but rather "a part of our nation's broader strategy" to become more integrated into the European economy.

Baku 2015: Inaugural European Games launch in Azerbaijan this June

Technology, sports stars and Coca-Cola converge at exciting new venue

By THE WASHINGTON TIMES

When the first-ever European Games launch this June in Baku, technology, athletes and entertainers will command the stage in a two-week extravaganza certain to catapult Azerbaijan onto the global sports stage.

Baku is a city known for its rich European history and culture, but after a massive construction effort it will also showcase a state-of-the-art sports venue

Adrian Corcoran, Baku 2015's director of technology, proclaimed last month.

The European Games are the continent's first major multi-sport event, with participants from all countries regulated by the European Olympic Committees. Baku, a capital city on the Caspian Sea, was awarded the first ever games back in 2012 and will host the first competition starting June 12. The European Games will take place every four years thereafter, with the next competition slated for 2019

Of the 18 venues that will host



unlike any in the world.

The European Games is the first multi-sport event to rely entirely on cloud-based technology for both infrastructure and software applications, a model that is likely to be adopted by all major sports events in the future.

Baku 2015 will also make use of more than 600 kilometres of fibre optic network to connect venues. That new optical fibre network won't just bring the games to life on television and computer screens, it will also provide a lasting benefit to the former Soviet republic with a booming oil economy and a populace craving innovation, information and economic opportunity.

"The European Games is an opportunity for Azerbaijan to be at the forefront of technological advancements in sport and we are extremely happy with how our preparations are progressing so far,"



competition ranging from boxing and boxing to volleyball and gymnastics, the majority are ready. And the main arena is due to be finished in a few short weeks.

Some of the world's biggest corporate names will also be front and center.

Coca-Cola -- a decades-long sponsor of the Olympic was -- was the latest to sign on as an official partner of the European Games last month. Its logo and soda products will be visible throughout Baku 2015 for what company executives see as the next big global sporting event.

"This is an exciting opportunity to support a new and innovative event that will unite Europe in a celebration of sport and active lifestyle," explained Galya Frayman

Molinas, President of Coca-Cola's Turkey, Caucasus and Central Asia Business Unit. "We are very proud to be supporting the inaugural European Games, which will soon become one of the international calendar's leading multi-sport events."

Other corporate partners include Azerbaijan Airlines, oil giants BP and SOCAR and P&G.

The host country also has assembled a star-studded lineup of global ambassadors and entertainers to showcase Azerbaijan's many talents, including actor and comedians Bahram Baghirzade and Murad Dadashev as well as female singing sensations Nigar Jamal and Roya Aykhan.

Shahdag: The skiing gem of Azerbaijan

By THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Tens of thousands of skiers each year make the trek up the mountains surrounding the town of Gusar to the Shahdag Winter Summer Tourism Complex. The world-class ski resort is especially popular around World Azerbaijanis Solidarity Day and the New Year's holiday.

The complex is less than 20 miles north of the town of Gusar, about 8,200 feet above sea level. Temperatures are perfect for skiing, bottoming out around 34 degrees on winter nights and topping out at 68 degrees during the summer days.

The facilities offer a seemingly endless list of sports and leisure activities all year round, from snowshoeing, skiing and snow tubing in the winter to horse trekking and rope swinging in summer. The resort delivers unforgettable excitement and entertainment, all set against a backdrop of stunning natural beauty and invigorating mountain air.

The ski slopes have grown from 4,700 feet in tracks a few years ago to more than 6,560 feet now. A gondola infrastructure was launched this winter, giving skiers access to six new slopes.

Amenities are no problem, either. The five-star Park Chalet and Gaya Residence hotels provide luxury accommodations. The Park Chalet includes 164 bedrooms, plus bars, restaurants, fitness facilities and a spa. For hungry skiers, five more cafes and restaurants opened across the complex this winter.

If you are longing for a breath of fresh mountain air and plenty of thrilling sports activities during your stay in Azerbaijan, Shahdag Winter-Summer Tourism complex is a must-see destination.



Tovuz, the land of antiquity and natural beauty

By THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Mountainous and picturesque, Tovuz is one of the Caucasus' most visually diverse regions, lined with wineries, farms, rolling rivers, historical monuments and lush Alpine forests perfect for hunting.

For history buffs, there are 64 official historical sites and monuments sanctioned by the Culture of Ministry, including the 13th-century Haji Bagir mosque in Duzgirigli village and the Kirzan temple dating to the 12th century. Other architectural attractions worth exploring include eight-corner sepulchers in Gazgulu village, a railway bridge built in 1880, and 19th-century tombs in Yukhari.

Tovuz also is home to one of the main

richest agrarian centers, perfect for nature lovers who want to explore rugged mountain lands or Alpine forests teeming with oak, beech, walnut, hornbeam and iron trees as well as wild fruit shrubs. A rare Eldar Shami pine is protected in the Garayazi State Reserve in Jeyranchol. Animals also abound, and it is easy to spot gazelles, roe deers, wolves, foxes, hares, francolins and partridges along the fields and forests of Tovuz.

Keeping the tradition of its Turkish settlers, Tovuz also offers numerous hunting opportunities. With government permits, visitors can hunt hares and various swimming birds skipping across the Kura, Akhindja, Tovuz and Zayam rivers.

For the curious, there is a sour water spring in Catakh village. Because of its sour taste, the water is known by the locals as Turshsu. It contains various chemical minerals that are used for medicinal treatments. In Asrik, there are 36 water springs. Among the most famous are the Findigli, Maral and Shalala. Most of the spring-fed water bodies boast nearby restaurants.

The vast sub-Alpine meadows are the center of Tovuz's agriculture industry, providing winter and summer pastures for livestock farmers as well as vineyards that gave rise to the region's booming wine industry. Archaeological finds, including ancient vessels for wine storage, pinpoint the industry's origins to the seventh century. The industry flourished as German settlers brought new skills and recipes. The area also became famous for producing cognac, which supplied the entire Russian market. Tovuz Baltiya Ltd. is the main producer and exporter of wine products.

The Tovuz region also affords a variety of cuisines, rich in dough meals as well as dishes made with abundant greens and potatoes. Other delicacies include pilaf, barbecue, fried vegetables and the hometown favorite dish known as khingal. Drinks such as buttermilk, dovga, atlama and fresh fruit juices complement the area's wide selection of wines and cognac.

It is impossible to imagine Tovuz without saz music. Saz is the national musical instrument of Azerbaijan. It is popular in Tovuz. Weddings, parties, local or state-level ceremonies as well as many restaurants are enriched by the musical talents of ashigs, the performers of saz music.

Source: Azerbaijan's official tourism portal

and ancient Alban settlements. The Alban temple, dating to the fifth century, and several other preserved structures once served as shelters for dervishes who led ascetic lifestyles.

The region is also one of the Caspian's



The region draws its name from two of the ancient Turkish tribes that settled there: the Tovuz and the Ovuz. Its buildings and monuments preserve some of the region's rich culture and history, dating to medieval times.



TOP 10 REASONS TO VISIT AZERBAIJAN

1. Visit the largest saltwater lake in the world: The Caspian Sea.
2. Shop at the crossroads of the Silk Road, in Sheki City.
3. Learn and live the legends of the Land of Fire.
4. Tour some of the world's most magnificent monuments.
5. Be wowed by the modern architecture of Baku.
6. Explore rare mud volcanoes.
7. Thrill your taste buds with the unique flavors of Azerbaijani cuisine.
8. Experience nine of the world's 11 climactic zones in one country. Azerbaijan offers it all, from sun-splashed beaches and lush subtropics to the fruit orchards of fertile farmlands and snowy mountain tundra.
9. Shop, dine and stroll the history of Baku Boulevard.
10. Enjoy a rare oil resort in Naftalan.

www.azerbaijan.travel

Source: Azerbaijan's official tourism portal

Flavors of Azerbaijan

Flavors that will take you
to the heart of the Silk Road

Pomegranate

The “Pomegranate” can rightly be called the “king” of fruits in Azerbaijan - some varieties of pomegranates grown in Azerbaijan are unique with the Goycay District as the home of the Pomegranates in Azerbaijan. Each year in October Azerbaijan hosts Pomegranate Festival in Goychay that attracts people from all corners of society. The Festival features Azerbaijani fruit-cuisine followed by parade with traditional dances and music, as well as competitions and contests such as

pomegranate squeezing or fruit eating. The different products of this fruit, especially when they are 100 per cent natural pure pomegranate juice and not from concentrate are of special interest to the foreign consumer.

The primary reason people drink pomegranate juice is its well publicized health benefits and healthy antioxidant nutrients. Studies have already discovered that pomegranate juice contains more polyphenols (antioxidants) than green tea, blueberry juice, or red wine.

According to scientific studies conducted by world-class university researchers and published in peer-reviewed scientific journals about the effects of consuming pomegranate products in patients with various health conditions, recent researches suggest

that pomegranate juice minimizes complications associated with kidney disease; other clinical trials using pomegranate juice came to conclusion that it might prevent prostate cancer or slow its growth; it might help with heart health, blood flow circulation and artery stiffening issues, etc.

US Buyers who first came to Azerbaijan for pomegranate juice were struck by two things: the quality of the product and the scale of production. Azerbaijani pomegranate juice, they found, was of excellent quality, possessing a natural sweetness greater than many other juice providers.

Used to Soviet and post-Soviet era industry standards, juice company executives now had to upgrade to ISO and HACCP standards demanded by the West. Some companies have done this and have even gone further—two, for example, discovered the advantages of kosher certification, the obtaining of which gained them access to Israeli and the US markets as well.

Try 100% Pure Pomegranate Juice made from pomegranates Azerbaijan is known for. Not From Concentrate. No Added Sugar. No Preservatives. No Artificial Colors.

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