

Israeli Presence in Central Asia: From Severance to Infiltration



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Abstract: *This research paper examines Israel's role in Central Asia, an open arena for regional and international competition due to its geostrategic importance. Israel has a comprehensive strategy to penetrate the region through economic, diplomatic, security, and soft power mechanisms, coordinating with Turkey, which has facilitated its access to Central Asian markets. Israel has strengthened its influence in various fields and achieved regional balances that serve its interests, such as encircling Iran and its nuclear agenda.*

Keywords: *Israeli penetration ; Central Asia ; peripheral alliance strategy; regional balances; regional rivalry.*

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Introduction:

Israel worked from the outset to establish strong diplomatic relations with Central Asian countries through reciprocal official visits and early recognition of their independence, aiming to create suitable conditions for discussing cooperation based on their needs and priorities in the post-independence period. Within the framework of the "Alliance of Parties" strategy proposed by Ben-Gurion, which was adopted in the initial phase of Israeli engagement, Israel pursued a cooperative and economic approach by establishing economic projects, providing financial and economic assistance, and facilitating Israeli investments and the entry of Zionist businessmen into the region. Additionally, various mechanisms of cultural cooperation were employed, given the presence of a large Jewish community in these countries, especially Uzbekistan. In this context, Israel presents itself to the region as a leading development model in the agricultural sector and as an effective intermediary for attracting European and American investments and capital. On this basis, Israel was able from the early decades to significantly strengthen its relations with both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in various fields, and to varying degrees with Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. This strategy enabled Israel to secure its energy and uranium needs, develop a promising market for Israeli weapons, and closely monitor Iran.

This paper aims to highlight the effectiveness of Israeli influence through various mechanisms that have proven successful in the field and the interests it seeks to achieve. This leads to the following question: To what extent has Israel been able to penetrate Central Asian countries?

The research paper was based on the following axes:

1. Determinants of the Israeli role in Central Asia
2. The evolution of Israel's relationship with Central Asian countries, including balances and challenges
3. Future factors governing the development of Israel's relationship with Central Asian countries

1. Determinants of Israel's role in Central Asian countries:

The Central Asian region is a highly significant area for regional powers, particularly Turkey, Iran, and Israel, as it borders the Caspian Sea, which is rich in oil and gas, and serves as a crossroads for major pipelines transporting gas from East Asia and the South Caucasus to Europe. Central Asia refers to a vast area stretching from the borders of China in the east to the Caspian Sea in the west, from Russia in the north to Iran and Afghanistan in the south. The countries in this region have a long history due to their importance to invaders and trade along the ancient Silk Road (Dar, 2014, p. 60). The five countries are Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, with a total area of 4,003,400 km². These countries form a large part of the "heart of the world" and the Eurasian continent,

as theorised by political geographer Halford Mackinder in his 1904 article "The Geographical Pivot of History." He argued that the landmass known as the global island is the key to strategic dominance, consisting mainly of Eurasia, which includes Central Asia, the Caucasus, parts of present-day Russia, and access to the region's energy resources. (Hess, p. 95)

Although located on the geographical margins of Israel, its interest in positioning itself among the countries of the region emerged early through the "strategy of the Alliance of Parties". This approach was adopted in the 1950s, when Israel developed strategic alliances with non-Arab Muslim countries, especially Turkey, pre-Islamic Revolution Iran, and Imperial Ethiopia, to counter unified Arab opposition to Israel and the growing influence of former Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser in particular (Zisser, 2019, pp. 226-227)

1.1 Factors conducive to Israeli penetration of Central Asian countries: These factors include

a. The Turkish role in Central Asia:

In the 1990s, many Israeli companies were able to access Asian markets under the cover of Turkish companies, and the partnership between Turkey and Azerbaijan created conditions for supplying oil through the Baku-Ceyhan line to Israel via the occupied port of Ashkelon. These economic advantages have stimulated Israeli investments in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, prompting the United States to maintain good relations with Azerbaijan and to mediate in the ongoing conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia to ensure these projects are not exposed to security threats. This US-backed strategy encourages Israel to strengthen ties with Turkey and Azerbaijan to consider transporting its natural gas to Europe through the same line, which is the main competitor to the Russian Nord Stream 2 project. Meanwhile, the absence of an Arab role has significantly helped consolidate Israel's influence in the region.

b. Jewish minorities in Central Asian countries: Bukhara Jews are among the oldest communities in Central Asia, with an ancient history. Historical records indicate that they settled as early as the fourth century AD in the region known as the "Emirate of Bukhara", an important centre on the Silk Road, leading to the formation of two distinct communities: Bukharian Jews and Ashkenazi Jews (Levin, March 2025, p. 8)

Israel exploited this presence in two main ways. The first was to open the door for immigration from these countries to Israel; approximately 1.5 million Jewish immigrants from around the world arrived in the occupied territories of Palestine in the 1990s, about 200,000 of whom came from Central Asian countries, especially Uzbekistan. The second approach was to maintain the presence of financial and economic lobbies in those countries that influence decision-making institutions, ensuring the facilitation of Israeli interests, from the flow of investments to the arms trade with Central Asian countries.

1.2. Mechanisms of Israeli penetration in Central Asian countries:

a. Political and economic mechanisms: Israel was among the first countries to recognise the Central Asian governments after their independence. On 10 April 1992, it began establishing relations with Uzbekistan, and as of 21 February 1992, it initiated relations with Kazakhstan (Aydın, 2022, p. 27)

Regarding Turkmenistan, dialogue between the two parties was active until the 1990s, after which Turkmenistan shifted its interest more towards Iran than Israel. The same applies to Tajikistan, which redirected its external relations towards Iran, rendering its relationship with Israel ineffective. Similarly, relations with Kyrgyzstan remained limited; with bilateral trade volume, staying at around one million dollars for two decades (Karpovich, Nogmova, & Aleksanyan, 2020, p. 32) Israel's role is mainly focused on Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

Later, Diplomatic visits between Israel and Central Asian countries continued. Former President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, visited Israel in February 1993. In July 1994, Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres made an official visit to Uzbekistan. Uzbek President Islam Karimov, the first president from the region, visited Israel in 1992 to develop relations between the two countries in agriculture and irrigation. The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs is being reorganised into a department focused on European countries in the post-Soviet space (Eurasia I) and another dedicated to the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus (Eurasia II) (LevyStone, 2022, p. 3) . From a diplomatic perspective, Israel's goal remains to seek greater diplomatic support from Asian countries.

Regarding economic relations, Israel focused more on Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Among the manifestations of economic cooperation between Israel and the five countries, it held its first joint economic conference with Uzbekistan in March 1992, three months after the official announcement of the end of the Soviet Union, to discuss these countries' needs for projects and economic aid. Since Uzbekistan gained independence in 1991, Israeli companies have established 45 joint projects there. The volume of trade between the two countries reached 27 million dollars in 2000, while trade relations with Kazakhstan grew by about 17 million dollars, double the figure recorded in 1999 (Blua, 2001)

Israel imports about 25% of its oil needs from Kazakhstan, and in December 2021, 93 Israeli companies were registered as active there. The volume of trade in 2021 amounted to about 264.4 million dollars, and in 2023, Kazakhstan exported goods worth 340 million dollars to Israel. The main products exported were crude oil (340 million dollars), sulphur (11.6 million dollars), and coal blocks (6.42 million dollars). Israel exported 118 million dollars to Kazakhstan, with the main products being potassium fertilisers (16.3 million dollars), tropical fruits (9.21 million dollars), and other products (Kazakhstan/Israel, 2023)

Regarding Uzbekistan, between 2017 and 2019, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry between Israel and Uzbekistan was established, increasing the trade

rate from 44 million dollars to 47 million dollars. Israeli companies are present in vital sectors, including agriculture, health, and security (Levystone, 2022, p. 4).

b. Security mechanisms: Following their newfound independence and the geopolitical and military vacuum created by the fall of the Soviet Union, the countries of the region sought to rebuild their armies and required intelligence and security cooperation to address security threats and contain the influence of jihadist movements. The elimination of Islamic fundamentalism is a shared objective between the countries of the region and Israel. Both parties have worked to combat any model that uses al-Qaeda or Salafi-jihadist ideology as a reference point, and security threats from Pakistan and Afghanistan present a challenge to the region's security and stability.

In this context, Israeli aerospace companies sold "Heron Mek" model drones to Kazakhstan, valued at tens of millions of dollars. Moshe Levy, General Manager of the Military Aircraft Group at Israel Aerospace Industries, stated that these drones can perform various tasks, including border protection, and can land on any airstrip, with the capability to operate at an altitude of 35,000 feet. (Israeli IAI sold two Heron MKI uva to kazakhstan, 2021)

Israel has also taken advantage of the ongoing conflict in the region between political regimes and armed opposition movements with an Islamic character to increase its security cooperation

C - Soft mechanisms: Israel employed soft power tools, particularly through cultural exchange, with a focus on Uzbekistan, the largest of the Central Asian republics, where it established a branch of the Jewish Agency, "Sahtot". In the Uzbek capital, Tashkent, this agency organised the immigration of Uzbek Jews to Israel. Of approximately 120,000 Jews in Uzbekistan, about 70,000 actually emigrated. At the end of the twentieth century, the collapse of the Soviet Union led to one of the largest migration waves to Israel, with about 850,000 Jews arriving between 1989 and 1995 (Desille, 2019, pp. 287-288)

Israel also funds hundreds of educational exchanges, bringing many Asian experts from various disciplines to study at the Israeli Foreign Ministry's Center for International Cooperation, known as MASHAV, as part of efforts to limit Jewish emigration from the region. Today, the historical Jewish connection is an asset in Israel's relations with Central Asian countries (Aydin, 2022, p. 27)

Bukhara Jews hold significant positions in decision-making bodies in Russia, Israel, and Washington. Among the most prominent Uzbek figures is billionaire Lev Avrevich Leviev, known as the King of Diamonds, who maintains important relationships with authorities in Moscow, Washington, and Tel Aviv. According to statistics on Jews in North and Central Asia in the twentieth century, in 1920 Jews were distributed in varying numbers: Azerbaijan 25,000, Bukhara 20,000, and Kyrgyzstan 2,600, with Jews constituting 0.58% of the total population of North and Central Asia (Linfield, 1924, p. 330)

2. The Evolution of Israel's Relations with Central Asian Countries

1.2 Central Asian countries' interactions with Israel's role:

a. Israel-Uzbekistan relationship: Historically, Uzbekistan has been one of the most important centres of Jewish settlement in the Soviet Union and is home to the Bukhara Jews, who are the ancestors of the current Eastern Jews and have been settling there for 1,200 years.

The first high-level official visit between the Uzbek and Israeli parties took place in 1998, when both sides agreed to strengthen relations in all fields, including economic, agricultural, political, defence, and security cooperation. After the appointment of Firuza Makhmudova as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to Tel Aviv, she told Israel Hayom that both countries have enormous potential for business partnerships in entrepreneurship, agriculture, water resources management, science, education, start-ups, technology, and information. She called on the Israeli business community to be more active in the Uzbek market (elmas, 2021).

Uzbekistan remains one of the most dynamic economies, with 6.5 percent GDP growth in 2024. The volume of foreign trade in the same year reached about 66 billion dollars, and the economy depends on wealth and mineral resources. Proven natural gas reserves are about 675.9 billion cubic metres, while crude oil reserves are about 19.5 million tonnes in 2024 (ofUzbekistan, 2025, p. 3) Over the past five years, exports from Israel to Uzbekistan have decreased at an annual rate of 6.18%, falling from 35.7 million to 26 million dollars in 2023. In the same year, Uzbekistan exported 9.59 million dollars to Israel. Among the main goods exported to Israel, textiles and fruits increased by 16.2%, rising from 4.53 million dollars in 2018 to 9.59 million dollars in 2023 (OEC, 2023)

The volume of trade exchange between the two countries is about 50 billion dollars. Israel's economic investment in Uzbekistan includes agriculture, medicine, information systems, and security. It is noted that, despite Israeli interest, Azerbaijan remains Israel's primary ally in the region, while its relationship with Uzbekistan ranks lower. Russia remains Uzbekistan's main partner, followed by China.

b. Israel-Kazakhstan relations: Israel recognised Kazakhstan as an independent state in December 1992, and subsequently opened an embassy in the capital. The Kazakh embassy in Israel was established in 1996. On 29 June 1999, the Almaty Agreement was signed, aiming to strengthen mutual trade and economic relations. Under this agreement, both parties committed, within the framework of their domestic legislation and international obligations, to promote and develop bilateral trade (ofkazakhestan, 1998, p. 2)

The Israel-Kazakhstan Chamber of Commerce was established in 2004 to further develop trade and economic ties. Kazakhstan supplies 25% of Israel's oil needs, making energy a central aspect of bilateral relations. As of 17 October 2019,

Kazakhstan had registered 141 joint ventures with Israel, operating in construction, oil and gas, metallurgy, manufacturing, cable production, telecommunications, finance and insurance, real estate, medicine, water supply, agriculture, education, and various scientific and technical fields (Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the State of Israel, 2024)

According to the National Bank of Kazakhstan, the net direct investment flow from Israel to Kazakhstan in 2024 was \$53.7 million, and since 2005, Israel has invested \$442.2 million in the Kazakh economy. From Kazakhstan's perspective, relations were driven by factors such as rapprochement with Washington and the European Union, as well as the desire to benefit from Israel's technical and technological expertise. Kazakhstan was also interested in Israel's advanced technology, and many Israeli media sources reported that Kazakhstan purchased the Israeli NSO spy programme for use against opponents of the ruling regime. From Israel's perspective, Kazakhstan is a reliable supplier of energy and uranium. Kazakhstan is the world's largest uranium producer, accounting for 41% of global uranium production (bank, 2022, p. 20)

C. Israel's relationship with Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan :

Turkmenistan: : Bilateral relations began with Israel's recognition of Turkmenistan as an independent state in 1991, and diplomatic relations were established in 1993. Since the 1990s, many bilateral agreements have been signed, including an agreement on cooperation in culture, education and science in 1995. Diplomatic visits began in 1994, starting with Shimon Peres's visit to the capital of Turkmenistan. In 1995, Turkmen President Niyazov visited Israel, but the accreditation of an Israeli embassy was delayed until 2013. Trade between the two countries remains very limited, with Israeli exports to Turkmenistan accounting for 1.1% and imports 6% (Department, 2020)

China dominates the Turkmenistan market with more than 80%, followed by Turkey and Russia in second place. Since 2009, a gas pipeline has connected China and Central Asian countries, including three gas lines from Turkmenistan transiting Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, and a fourth line, Line D, which takes a different route through Turkmenistan and Tajikistan to China. More important for Israel in building relations with Turkmenistan has been its dispute with Iran over potentially vast hydrocarbon reserves in the Caspian Sea.

Tajikistan: Israel recognised the independence of the Republic of Tajikistan in 1991, and in March 1992, diplomatic relations were established between the two countries. The first official meeting between the presidents took place in 1995 on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly. In 2020, the volume of trade between the two countries amounted to 479.7 thousand US dollars. In 2022, Israel exported goods to Tajikistan worth 621 thousand dollars, with the main products being phones, seeds, and insulated wires. In 2023, Tajikistan exported goods worth 25 thousand dollars to Israel, mainly tobacco, electrical machinery, and electrical

transformers. However, the export rate decreased from 190 thousand dollars in 2018 to 25 thousand US dollars in 2023 (OEC, Tajikistan ISRAEL, 2023)

due to Tajikistan's dependence on China. In the first half of 2022, the volume of trade increased by 28% compared to the same period in 2021. In addition, the two countries cooperate within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization on security issues and the fight against terrorism, religious extremism, and drugs. Israel is therefore trying to establish a presence in Tajikistan to contain Iranian influence, fully aware that the main beneficiaries are China and India, which are expanding rapidly in the region (Shakir, 2017, p. 12)

Currently, there is no Israeli embassy in Tajikistan; representation is handled by the Israeli embassy in Uzbekistan.

Kyrgyzstan: In March 1992, relations between Kyrgyzstan and Israel were established. Despite an official visit by the President of Kyrgyzstan, Askar Akayev, in 1993, diplomatic relations were not fully developed. There is no Israeli embassy in Kyrgyzstan, nor does Kyrgyzstan have an embassy in Israel; instead, Kyrgyzstan is represented in Israel through its embassy in Turkey. In 2020, Kyrgyzstan's total exports to Israel amounted to approximately 64,900 US dollars, with the main exports being machinery, electrical equipment, clothing, and tobacco substitutes. Conversely, Kyrgyzstan imported about 4 million US dollars' worth of goods from Israel in 2020, representing a 55% increase compared to 2019.

The main imports were pharmaceutical products, machinery, and electrical equipment. In 2020, Israel's imports from Kyrgyzstan accounted for 0.002% of its total imports, while Kyrgyzstan's imports from Israel represented 0.73% of its total imports, with total trade exchange also at 0.73% (Department, Kyrgyzstan, 2020)

This very low rate is due to factors such as the significant trade influence of Russia and China. Notably, China is Kyrgyzstan's largest trading partner and holds 40% of the country's debt. Additionally, the ongoing political crises in Kyrgyzstan in 2005, 2010, and 2020 have contributed to Israel's lack of motivation to develop its relationship with Kyrgyzstan.

3. Future Stakes in Israel's Relationship with Central Asian Countries

3.1 Regional balances that Israel seeks to achieve in the region:

- **Strengthening a non-Arab, pro-Israel, anti-Iranian front:** With the aim of breaking its regional isolation following the wave of Arab normalisation and increasing its influence in Islamic regions outside the Middle East, as well as responding to the growing Iranian influence in Central Asian countries. In parallel, the increasing security threats in Afghanistan have strongly motivated countries in the region, including Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, to enhance their security cooperation with Israel.

-Monitoring regional security threats: The region is experiencing increasing security threats, which have worsened since the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021. This has had serious effects on internal security and the region as a whole. The greatest concern is the potential revival of jihadist organisations in the region following the Israeli war on Gaza and Lebanon, and the escalation of popular and media anger against the Israeli presence in Central Asian countries. Iraqi, Syrian, and Afghan factions may encourage these groups to transfer their activities or open new fronts in Central Asian countries, particularly Tajikistan. Iran may use these fronts to pressure its opponents.

near Israel, especially after the fall of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria in 2024. Uzbek fighters are a source of concern for Uzbekistan and are a prominent source of foreign fighters in various jihadist armed organisations, especially in Syria. It is estimated that about 5,000 fighters from Central Asia have travelled to Syria, and at least 1,500 Uzbeks have joined armed jihadist groups (Levin, March 2025, p. 7)). Uzbekistan fears their impact after the fall of the Assad regime.

-Israel's energy security: Israel imports about 25% of its energy needs from Kazakhstan and aims to become a key hub for importing and refining oil from Central Asia and the Caspian Sea, as well as securing its transportation route, the Ceyhan oil pipeline, which runs from Azerbaijan through Georgia to the Turkish port of Ceyhan and then to occupied Ashkelon. Both Iran and Israel operate according to the logic of energy geopolitics and transportation, with Israel having worked for decades to develop its relationship with Azerbaijan, while Iran has focused on strengthening its ties with Armenia and Georgia in the Black Sea region, following the dynamics of energy supply and transportation routes.

3.2 Challenges facing the Israeli role in Central Asia:

The Israeli role faces several regional and international challenges that will limit its scope and result in gains that do not offer a broad horizon for Israeli influence in the region as a whole:

- The regional weight of Russia and China in Central Asia: Regardless of the growth of new regional powers, China and Russia have remained the main partners in the region in recent years. China's trade has expanded more rapidly than trade with Russia, and Turkey is also an important actor in Central Asia.

-The Central Asian states do not present a unified consensus in their foreign policies or share a common vision for building a stable security region. Each state maintains conflicting foreign relations with regional and international powers, making the region a significant arena for bargaining among neighbouring and international actors. All Central Asian states acknowledge that both Russia and China exert strong influence over the region's political, economic, and security dynamics. However, deep differences among the Central Asian states hinder the unification of their efforts within a regional system. As a result, this situation

sometimes facilitates Israeli penetration and makes it difficult for these states to adopt unified positions on certain issues, in line with Israeli pragmatism.

-Financial and technical assistance has long been a powerful mechanism for Israel to penetrate Central Asian countries by investing in their situational needs and succeeding in normalising relations. However, international financial institutions also play an important role in financing development projects and programmes. These institutions include the World Bank Group, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and the Asian Development Bank. Uzbekistan received about 13.8 billion dollars in aid from international institutions, Kyrgyzstan more than 4.2 billion dollars, Kazakhstan 1.7 billion dollars, Tajikistan 511 million dollars, and Turkmenistan 51 million dollars. In the first six months of 2023, a quarter of Tajikistan's total revenue came from international institutions, amounting to about 750 million dollars (Paper, 2024, p. 5)

-The impact of the 2023 Gaza War on Israel's relationship with regional countries: As political alignment with Gaza deepened, waves of public anger in Central Asian countries against the Israeli presence escalated, resulting in numerous attacks and clashes at Israeli centres and synagogues in Tashkent. This demonstrated significant Islamic sympathy for the Palestinians affected by Israeli bombing, indicating that Israel suffered an external setback due to its handling of the war in Gaza, which temporarily affected its interests.

Conclusion:

Israel was able to significantly strengthen its influence in the countries of the region in the areas of economics, investment opportunities, and mega projects. Israel represents a prominent arms market for defence equipment, as well as for security and intelligence cooperation. This was facilitated by a combination of internal factors related to the needs of newly independent countries and other factors linked to the Turkish role and its contribution to Israel's positioning in the region. Additionally, the desire of secular Central Asian countries to diversify their foreign partners played a role. As a result, this research paper presents a number of findings, which are listed as follows:

At the beginning of its entry into the countries of the region, Israel focused on economic penetration, providing financial and technical assistance, and cooperating in security and defence at a time when these economies were facing many difficulties. This presented an opportunity for Israel to meet its needs and establish strong relations.

Israeli influence in the region is strongest in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, where coordination and cooperation have reached the highest levels in the economic sector, investments, and arms trade. There is also significant cultural cooperation, due to the presence of a large community, most of whom are in Uzbekistan. Israel has worked to secure its energy needs, nationalise its supply

lines, and even meet its uranium requirements, ensuring that nuclear technologies are not exported to hostile countries.

Central Asian countries represent a promising consumer market for Israeli weapons and advanced technological and cyber solutions to strengthen their security against opponents of secular regimes and any Islamic fundamentalist models supported by Iran, as well as in response to the security situation in Afghanistan. This vision serves as a common denominator, aligning the aspirations of the countries in the region and Israel regarding the region as a whole.

The Israeli role aims to encircle the Iranian presence, which was marked by strong economic influence, to prevent Iranian-backed Islamist parties from coming to power, and to ensure that Iran does not obtain additional uranium from Kazakhstan after exceeding the nuclear threshold.

Despite the expansion of Israel's sphere of influence in the region, further emphasised in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, it does not surpass the role of Russia, China, or even Turkey in all areas. However, Israel has established close cooperation with Central Asian countries, enabling it to attract Western investments.

The Gaza War of 2023 was a litmus test for the extent of Israel's influence and demonstrated how far the leaders of Central Asian countries are willing to maintain their interests with Israel despite public and media outrage. The Russian-Ukrainian War of 2022 also confirmed the importance of Iran, especially for landlocked countries in Asia, as an outlet for exporting their oil away from Russian routes.

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