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Azerbaijan: Israel won't use our bases for Iran strike

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The Azerbaijani government has angrily denied a report in an American magazine that claims Israel plans to use airbases in Azerbaijan to either launch an attack on Iran or return its fighter jets there after a strike on Iranian nuclear facilities.

"There will be no actions against Iran ... from the territory of Azerbaijan," an Azerbaijani defence spokesman told reporters in Baku on Friday.

He accused unnamed "international organisations and media structures under their control" of "intentionally increasing tensions" between Iran and Azerbaijan.

Officials in Israel have not commented on the report. Ron Prosor, Israel's United Nations ambassador, told The National in New York that he had no knowledge of the story. Neither the Pentagon nor the Iranian mission to the UN responded to a request for comment.

The magazine Foreign Policy, released on Wednesday, quoted unnamed US diplomats and intelligence officials as expressing deep concern that Israel would take advantage of its close relationship with Azerbaijan to make use of four available former Soviet airbases there. The article quotes four senior US officials as saying Israel had recently won access to the bases.

"The Israelis have bought an airfield, and the airfield is called Azerbaijan," one US official reportedly said.

A US intelligence officer is quoted as saying, "We're watching what Iran does closely, but we're now watching what Israel is doing in Azerbaijan. And we're not happy about it."

US officials doubt whether Israel has the military capability on its own to attack Iranian nuclear facilities, which are suspected of enriching uranium for a weapon. Iran insists its nuclear programme is for peaceful purposes.

Israel is not thought to have the necessary firepower to set back the Iranian facilities for more than six months, according to a US Congressional research report.

Israel also lacks in-air refuelling capabilities for the 3,540-kilometre return flight from Israel.

"Access to such airfields is important for Israel, because it would mean that Israeli F-15I and F-16I fighter-bombers would not have to refuel mid-flight during a strike on Iran's nuclear facilities, but could simply continue north and land in Azerbaijan," the article said.

Unnamed US officials who are quoted said Israel would likely be permitted to land on the Azerbaijani bases after an attack and could use them to stage search and rescue operations into Iran.

"I doubt that there's actually anything in writing," a senior retired US diplomat who served in the region is quoted as saying.

"But I don't think there's any doubt - if Israeli jets want to land in Azerbaijan after an attack, they'd probably be allowed to do so."

Israel is deeply embedded in Azerbaijan, and has been for the last two decades.

The Azerbaijan-Israeli relationship was first mentioned in a 2006 published commentary by retired Israeli Brig Gen Oded Tira, who wrote: "We should also coordinate with Azerbaijan the use of airbases in its territory and also enlist the support of the Azeri minority in Iran."

The US administration has in recent months allowed senior military officials to openly speak out against an Israeli strike on Iran, saying it could cause a wider war that was neither in US nor regional interests.

Pro-Israel voices in the US on the other hand accuse the administration of leaks, such as that to Foreign Policy, intended to derail Israeli military planning.

"I think this leak ... is part of the administration's campaign against an Israeli attack," John Bolton, the neoconservative former US ambassador to the United Nations told the US television network Fox News on Friday.

The use of the airbases would build on Israel's close business and political partnership since the mid-1990s with Azerbaijan, which shares a 600km border with Iran.

A Wikileaks cable cited in the article quotes Ilham Aliyev, the Azerbaijani president, likening his country's relationship with Israel to an iceberg: "Nine-tenths of it is below the surface."

On the surface, Israeli companies have built the perimeter fence of Baku's international airport, protect energy infrastructure and provide body guards for the Azerbaijani president. Israel sells Azerbaijan mobile phones, ice cream and Maccabee beer, the magazine said.

More significantly, Israel has worked with the Azerbaijanis to develop a reconnaissance satellite system, is negotiating the Azerbaijani manufacture of infantry fighting vehicles and, in February, concluded a US\$1.6 billion (Dh5.8bn) arms deal with Azerbaijan to jointly build 60 Israeli drones.

This has infuriated Turkey, which recovered the wreckage of an Israeli drone on its territory last November.

Iranian-Azerbaijani ties have also been frayed recently, with Tehran accusing Baku of supporting Israeli-trained assassination teams killing Iranian nuclear scientists. The Azerbaijanis called the charge "slander".

In March, Baku said it had arrested 22 people suspected of spying for Iran and of planning "terrorist acts" against the US, Israel and western embassies. Iran denied the charges.

Some nationalist Azerbaijani politicians have gone as far as calling for the country to be renamed North Azerbaijan, implying that the 16 million Azeris living in northern Iran needed to be liberated.