

Mohammed Alrmizan: Saudi Arabia, Azerbaijan have common grounds for cooperation

Question: Which important issues can the proximity and interaction between Saudi Arabia and Azerbaijan solve in the vast region the two countries are located?

Answer: Although the distance between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Republic of Azerbaijan is not that much close, and yes each country's people speak different language and located in a different geography, there are several common grounds shall be considered, and that what international relations and diplomacy are about, bridging gaps and building up cooperation.

The commons concerns of Saudi Arabia and Azerbaijan begins from oil and gas industry, as both countries have a very active business in this sector, through regional security specially to regions next to their borders like Nagorno-Karabkh to Azerbaijan, and Yemeni dilemma to Saudi Arabia, to foreign policy where both countries are seen to be maintaining peaceful relation with neighbors, strengthening bilateral relation with Western power such as the United States, the United Kingdom, France, in addition to Russian and China.

Of course, both countries are members Organization of the Islamic Cooperation (OIC), which is one of the largest international organizations in the world. The importance of OIC element in the bilateral relation is significant as it manages members' conflicts or issues with other nations, such as Azerbaijanian right in Nagorno-Karabakh, which clearly seen in the annual report of OIC and its support to Azerbaijan.

While Azerbaijani-Saudi relation is seen very improving in recent two-three years, it is relevant to ask how both countries could help to solve some of the important issues or even conflict in the region specially those ones of concern to both countries.

On one side, one of the main security issues to Azerbaijan is with its neighbor Armenian and its control over Karabakh region, Saudi Arabia has been supportive of Azerbaijan in this context and called in various occasions to resolve this issue. In fact, until now, Saudi Arabia does not have official ties with Armenia, a thing that is possible shall be considered by Azerbaijani officials while thinking of Saudi Arabia.

On the other hand, Azerbaijan along with Saudi Arabia share the concerns over their security from attacks of any kind of intervention from another regional neighbor, which is the Islamic Republic of Iran. The latter has voiced out and, in some cases, done some acts that undermines regional security for instance, its communication with local and people of Karabakh independently from the Azerbaijani state, and its recent attacks on Saudi Arabia's oil refineries in Abqaiq district. While Saudi Arabia does not direct borders with Iran, but Azerbaijan does have a long line, it comes necessary to have both countries establish a political and security consultations related specially not only to Iranian behavior but also to gas and oil industries as well.

So, the more Azerbaijan and Saudi Arabia get closer in consulting each other and build up a communicational platform or channel, it is potentially going to help minimize some issues related to both countries as mentioned earlier.

Question: Saudi Arabia has been investing in Azerbaijan since 1990s. What is the current status of Saudi Arabia's investment programs in Azerbaijan?

A.: Saudi Arabia was amongst countries helping Azerbaijan back in the mid-1990s specially aftermath of conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. In recent days and as of now, according to numbers, Saudi investment including public and private reaching around \$370 million. The bilateral trade exchange between Azerbaijan and Saudi Arabia is not exceeding \$17 million, according to report by State Customs Committee of Azerbaijan. If considering how fast bilateral relation is growing, population growth in both countries, and economic opportunities, the current number (\$17 million) is seen very low. Thus, both countries shall focus on bringing economic development as much as both successfully doing on political side. However, while both governments could lead some initiatives, private sector shall be the main element in the economic growth between the two countries.

Question: What are the major directions of cooperation between the two countries? What spheres in Azerbaijan does Saudi Arabia take the most interest of and what could it specifically offer to Azerbaijan for further interaction?

A.: In terms of cooperation, there are many directions for increasing it for the benefit of both Azerbaijan and Saudi Arabia. What is strongly significant for Azerbaijan to consider in its bilateral relation with Saudis is the Saudi 2030 Vision, which is an economic, social and cultural plan and structure for many years to come. Saudi Vision 2030 focus on uplifting the country from dependence on oil, localizing industrial talents and production including military, telecommunication, soft and hard manufacture such as cars, electronic devices, among others. Azerbaijani could come in and provide Saudi Arabia what it has from goods and services in this regard in wide spectrum from economy and trade, through services and technologies, and military and arm industry.

In return, and too while considering the Saudi Vision 2030, Azerbaijan as well as the world's countries are invited to explore economic opportunities offered by one of the largest countries in terms of economic size, state facilitations, easy investments for foreign capitals and its important location either as producing and importing or exporting country. Largest oil company Saudi Aramco is to go public and offer shares for buyers in first week of December, so the invite for Azerbaijanis to explore this and many other opportunities.

Question: What are your visions over prospects of interaction in the fields of security and military cooperation?

A.: One of the evolving result of the Azerbaijani-Saudi relation development is seen in the fields of security and military. So recently Azerbaijan sent a military attaché to Riyadh. In last year, 2018 and this ongoing year 2019, several meetings occurred between Azerbaijani and Saudi sides on levels from diplomatic, economic and, defence and military.

While there were many agreements were signed last year and this year between military representatives, yet there is no significant developments like bilateral military exercises or joint arming manufacturing.

Thus, it is important to see these agreements go effective. One important thing that possibly Azerbaijanis could benefit from and help with is localizing military equipment and arms manufacturing. Azerbaijanis could convey their arming experiences to Saudis, which would contribute to arming security, indeed. Saudi Arabia established in 2017, The Saudi Arabian Military Industries (SAMI) to be nationally owned and to seek cooperation with various arming and defense companies.

Question: What are the prospects of mutual humanitarian and cultural relations? How could the expansion of mutual tourism play in upbringing bilateral ties?

A.: In the case of the young bilateral relational development such as Azerbaijan and Saudi Arabia, an important element shall be considered, which is culture and all what it has of meanings such like history, language, religion, national heritage, etc. Also, connection of think thanks, universities, and various social and economic institute is a key for a stronger bilateral relation such as the case of Azerbaijan and Saudi Arabia, which I think it is very limited if not existent and have to be improve by both states.

On one side, one shall think of the common grounds in terms of history and religion as both Azerbaijan and Saudi Arabia were once parts of the Ottoman Empire, then both gained their independence until now becoming known as their national and existential borders, culture, and language. Both are members of the OIC, which is another main part of their bilateral relation.

As part of culture, tourism comes in to complete the prospect of humanitarian side of the two countries. In a report published recently by King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, also known by its acronym (KFCRIS), on Azerbaijani-Saudi relation. The report included a section on culture and tourism and referred to some state number on tourist business and activity. It was noted that in last three years, 2016-2018, the number of Saudi (even the Emeritis were greater) doubled from around 7 thousand in 2016 to 30 thousand in 2017 and exceeding 70 thousand in last year. The more Saudis get to know and visit Azerbaijan, the more potential of Saudi business and investment come to Azerbaijan, and vice versa.

Since last year, there was no direct flight between Azerbaijan and Saudi Arabia, but after some local airplane companies in both countries signed a deal, now it is possible to fly directly.

Azerbaijanis seem to know how important the tourism is in its relation not only to Saudi Arabia but also to the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) including United Arab Emirates, Kingdom of Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and Oman. Azerbaijan beginning from 2015 granted VISA on arrival for citizens of the GCC.

However, bilateral communication in terms of states seem to be good, but in terms of state-independent entities such as people-to-people relation, private sector, I think Azerbaijanis have to invest in this subject. This could be engaging with Saudi as well as GCC journalists, and invite them to Azerbaijan, and help deliver to people what Azerbaijan is and how unique it is to its visitors, and its close geography to the Saudi Arabia and other members of the GCC.

The positive future and expected further cooperation of Azerbaijan and Saudi Araba is dependent on activating bilateral agreements. Also, so far, there have not any visit made by Saudi Kings to Azerbaijan. So, Azerbaijan may think of inviting the Custodian of the two holy mosques, King Salman bin Abdelaziz, which if happens, will, indeed, help make this bilateral cooperation more solid than it is.