

**Meeting with Jewish Diaspora members in Jinsa
December, 2007**

SPEECH

**by Mr. Ahmet Erentok,
Chairman of the Board of Azerbaijan Turkey Businessmen Association
(ATIB)**

Ladies and gentlemen,

I'm proud to be part of such an important event for discussing areas of cooperation between Jewish Diaspora in the US and Azerbaijan. Using the opportunity given to me, I would like to thank all of the Meeting participants for attributing importance to it.

First of all, I would like to say a few words about Azerbaijan's recent developments. As I have observed, the people here, in the West, still do not have enough information about our country.

I want to note that there is a high religious tolerance in Azerbaijan. Representatives of different confessions have lived in mutual co-existence in Azerbaijan for ages. Tens of national entities live in peace in the country. The Jewish community is an inseparable part of our society and plays an active role in development of Azerbaijan.

We have been living in independence for a relatively short period – just 16 years. However, our country has a checkered past and rich cultural values and customs.

Azerbaijan has made big progresses since independence. The Government has undertaken necessary reforms in economic, social and political spheres in this short period. The early years of independence were full of social and economic problems. The period of stagnation was accompanied by civil war and Armenian aggression and occupation of our territories.

The period of stagnation was reversed by economic and social developments in the mid 1990s. Now the Republic of Azerbaijan is one of the fastest growing countries in the World. By GDP growth during the last three years, Azerbaijan is not at the first place only in the region, but is the top performer globally. The growth was 26% in 2005, 35% in 2006 and more than 27% in the first nine months of the current year. This situation enables the Government to implement a range of social and economic programs.

More than 42 billion dollars have been invested in Azerbaijan economy since 1995, 70% of which are foreign investments. Over 600 thousand job places have

been created during the last three years. Poverty reduction is also being successfully implemented.

Azerbaijan's national economy successfully integrates to the world economy. Implementing global energy projects, Azerbaijan joins the world energy markets. As the President H.E. Ilham Aliyev stated, Azerbaijan has witnessed two important historical events in 2006. First, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, the main export route going into full operation. And the construction of Baku-Tbilisi-Arzurum gas pipeline finishing well ahead of schedule. These two projects are of great importance for Azerbaijan, its foreign relations, for the region and the entire world. We must not forget mentioning a notable and momentous project signed in February 2007, with our Georgian and Turkish brothers the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, another milestone that increases the role of Azerbaijan in the region.

Azerbaijan is a strategic player in Caspian energy politics both as a producer, exporter and as a transit country. These three facets are fundamental for the EU's energy supply security. It is noteworthy that oil and gas projects are being implemented in partnership with leading foreign companies and great support by the United States. By the way, Israel recently became one of the main consumers of Azerbaijan oil. The oil transported to the Mediterranean Sea goes to Israel refineries. This is a mutually beneficial project.

Despite the apparent successes, the country faces substantial challenges in the coming years, such as the reduction of oil dependency, which contributes to 84% of the overall GDP. The government is now targeting diverse areas to develop in the non-oil sector, which will continue to improve the population's well-being. The Government clearly understands the necessity to efficiently use favorable economic trends to tackle these issues and to diversify the economy.

Ladies and gentlemen,

There is all-round cooperation between the United States and Azerbaijan. This partnership is not limited only to economic relations. Continuing political reforms is an important component of our mutual relations. Furthermore, Azerbaijan actively participates in the anti-terror coalition, by contributing to security in the region.

One of the main obstacles to economic development in the region is undoubtedly the existing conflicts. These conflicts greatly hinder the improvement of nations' well-being by impeding economic development of the region.

Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict and the ungrounded issue of "Armenian Genocide", which is being discussed in several countries by the support of Armenian lobby are obstacles on the way of economic development in the region. 20% of our territories are under occupation. One million out of 8.5 million

population became refugees and internally displaced persons as a result of Armenian aggression. This is a great problem and an injustice for us. The United Nations Security Council has passed four resolutions stating unconditional liberation of Azerbaijan territories and withdrawal of Armenian armed forces from these territories. European Council has passed the similar resolution. However, they have not been implemented yet.

As I stressed, a large-scale and organised Armenian lobby, having a great financial support and the support of several dishonest politicians is functioning against us. The Armenian issue is emerging as a priority problem requiring the joint action of Azerbaijan and Turkey. It requires joint activity of state and government bodies scientific institutions, non-governmental organizations and business people. In case of realisation of Armenians' plans, our currently existing strategic advantages will disappear, the direct border between Azerbaijan and Turkey will be utterly removed and their geopolitical standing in the region will be seriously damaged that will result in weakening their control over the energy resources in the region.

On the other hand, Armenian people have to understand that the activity of Armenian lobby is negatively affecting first of all Armenians living in the territory of Armenia. The country is moved aside from the economic projects being implemented in the region and its access to resources necessary for developing the national economy is becoming limited. As a result, the well-being of population in Armenia is worsening day-by-day, which can be seen from the number of people abandoning the country.

It's worth to ask a question: If Turkey committed genocide against Armenians, why didn't it do the same against Jews and Greeks?

We regret that several people and organisations functioning abroad are threatening the stability in the region by establishing business relations with politicians of foreign countries and making decisions in parliaments of various countries for meeting interests of groups they are representing without taking problems and future of their compatriots into consideration. As a result our occupied territories are not given back, historically formed strategic cooperation with these countries are put into risk by enticing several politicians with verbal scenarios and lies and impenetrable obstacles are being created. Is this a goal? It would be better to leave investigating historical issues to professionals, wouldn't it? What can we achieve by commissioning an advocate with a work of a doctor, a psychologist with a work of an engineer and a politician with a work of an historian?

The World has significantly changed. The previous environment for achieving a hundred year ago wishes is not in place any more. Nowadays, conflict solution is possible only by consensus. Self-interested groups and their accomplices should not be given an opportunity, relations should be set and developed in each platform for more sustainable functioning of future circumstances.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Azerbaijan Turkey Businessmen Association (ATIB) is continuously functioning in this sphere. Let me bring a brief information about ATIB's mission into your notice before speaking about its activities on Armenian issue.

ATIB, as a non-governmental Association of entrepreneurs, is interested in promoting activities of business people in Azerbaijan by the overall development of economic cooperation within the Azerbaijan business community, foreign countries and by contributing to establishment of a favorable environment for entrepreneurship in the Republic. The mission of ATIB is to assist in developing the economic, social and cultural relations between Azerbaijan and other countries.

To achieve these goals, we focus our efforts mainly to increase investments in Azerbaijan and the region by contributing to the cooperation with Turkish, Azeri and other foreign country business associations such as UBCCE – Union of Black Sea and Caspian Confederation of Enterprises.

UBCCE, a non governmental business organization, which was established just a year before, is the first and unique example of private sector organizations coming together in this part of the globe. It aims to contribute to the economic and social development of the region by favoring the adoption of policies conducive to the better functioning of a market economy under optimal conditions for member countries. Presently, the organisation has 16 member business associations from 12 countries in the region.

When implementing its activities UBCCE deals with the respective governments and other international organizations active in economic field and within this perspective it aims to maintain close contacts with other international, European, regional and sectoral organizations to pursue its objectives.

Azerbaijan as a rapidly developing country in the region, plays an importance role to UBCCE.

- Azerbaijan's unique geo-political and geographic location,
- a "key country" role in regional projects,
- yearly growing economic power and fast economic development.

It's note worthy that Azerbaijan has a high level of political and economic relations with the majority and leading countries of UBCCE members and has historically formed connecting roles between UBCCE and the leading countries of the Eurasian region. Azerbaijani businessmen hold important business positions in the leading UBCCE countries.

Being a UBCCE member and its vice-president strengthens the role of ATIB as a key player of economic relations along with other leading countries of the Region. The foundation of this organization was the next step to increase Azerbaijan's importance as a link in cooperation between Europe and Asia.

As coming to ATIB's projects on tackling regional conflicts, I want to note ATAF – the Azerbaijan Turkey Historical Researches Foundation, which is one of the projects in this field. The Fund will focus on carrying out researches on Azerbaijan and Turkey history, determining joint problems and finding the ways for their solution, contributing to tackling the problems obstructing peace and economic integration and improvement of well-being in the region.

The Fund can play an important role in neutral and scientific evaluation of the Armenian problem, revealing the truth on the basis of existing documents and solving conflicts among the nations and problems obstructing cooperation in the region.

The full evaluation of economic potential of the region will be possible after ensuring peace among Caucasus nations. Economic Cooperation in the Caucasus is also important for realisation of economic integration potential in Eurasia region.

In conclusion, I would like to stress my belief in successful development of the bilateral relations between Azerbaijan and US and Israel. I think that the present meeting will certainly contribute to further widening of these relations. Using this opportunity I would also like to invite Jinsa to cooperation with ATAF – Azerbaijan Turkey Historical Researches Foundation. I think Jinsa's support in ATAF's activities would be essential in our efforts for contributing to peace in the region.

Well, thank you very much for your attention and I hope that our time here will be as enjoyable as it is productive and inspirational for the future of our region and we will have many more occasions to meet each other and share our views on developing cooperation among our nations.