

ISRAEL

In classrooms and out, Israel and Azerbaijan are ‘seeing each other as friends’



Seventh grader Eden Yousef (left) and her classmates leading a presentation on Azerbaijan's culture for educators from that country visiting Israel, including Emin Amrullayev (third from left).

By HILLEL KUTTLER

A 5-INCH BY 5-INCH RECTANGLE constructed from Lego pieces, a motor, and sensors whirled across a tabletop and returned, its motions impressing a dozen first-time visitors to an Israeli junior high school in mid-January.

Between the table used for robotics and an adjacent one featuring three simultaneous student chess games, the setting in the Haifa suburb of Kiryat Bialik could have been mistaken for a playroom. Instead, it's a key resource in developing young minds—and the visitors, educators from Azerbaijan, saw it as a potential model to implement back home.

The Azeri group of 10 high school principals and two education ministry officials had come for a weeklong look at a system that's helped to spur Israel's famed start-up economy.

Azerbaijan—a mountainous former Soviet republic of 10 million people along the Caspian Sea—is intent on improving its capabilities in science, innovation, and creativity, and sees Israel as a beacon. January's delegation will be followed by 50 Azeri high school teachers spending most of March in Israel, to

examine the education system in greater depth, with reciprocal visits by Israeli experts. The trips aim to implement changes in Azerbaijan's curricula when the next school term starts in September.

Arthur Lenk, who served from 2005 to 2009 as Israel's ambassador to Azerbaijan, called the education ties “a feel-good story” of the Jewish state's efforts in “building the next generation of Azeri kids” who'll launch an innovation-driven economy.

Such collaboration is particularly important for Israel, given that Azerbaijan is a secular Muslim-majority country bordering Iran. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992, bilateral trade has centered on defense and energy; one-third of Israel's gasoline is purchased from Azerbaijan.

Several members of the Azeri delegation refrained from discussing geopolitics and strategic alliances with an inquiring journalist, preferring education-centric topics.

The visit's roots were planted at a late-2017 meeting in Azerbaijan's capital of Baku between Lenk, then a consultant retired from the foreign ministry, and his host, education minister Mikayil Jabbarov. By then, Azerbaijan

had purchased \$4 billion in Israeli defense equipment and sought to improve the technical proficiency of those who'd be using it.

Lenk said he quickly settled on a partner: ORT Israel, a network of 200 junior high and high schools known for science and technology education, which also writes curricula used in other Israeli school systems. ORT's innovative pedagogy includes multidisciplinary collaboration among teachers, student-driven projects, even downtime for pupils to explore intellectually, as in the classroom housing the Lego robotics table and chess boards.

“We are trying to transform our education. We want to be on the same level as other educational systems,” Emin Amrullayev, an official in Azerbaijan's education ministry, said after visiting a school in the northern town of Kiryat Tivon on the delegation's first full day in Israel.

“If we don't bring [transformation] to school now, the children in 20 years will face serious challenges. What we've seen so far [in Israel] is a very brilliant example of project-based learning, especially that kids from different grades can collaborate,” Amrullayev said. He mentioned also being impressed by the teaching of artificial intelligence and robotics.

At the Kiryat Bialik school, a young teacher told the visitors that his principal asked what subject he's passionate about beyond the English language, which he was hired to instruct. Astronomy, he'd responded—and promptly was assigned to teach that, too. Last year, his students collaborated on projects measuring light pollution and evaluating as-

teroids' potential for striking Earth.

One of his current students, seventh grader Eden Yousef, has roots in Baku: It's her father's hometown, and her grandparents still live there.

The Azeri educators' visit “is great, because—I don't want to boast, but Israel is very technologically advanced and teaches in innovative ways,” she said. “I'm proud that the group from Azerbaijan is here and interested in advancing.”

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That, it is. The ORT schools' emphasis on robotics in classes and in students' free time appealed to Sevinj Orujova, a Baku principal. Back home, she said, students generally don't enter national, project-based competitions in science and engineering that many Israelis do.

The Israeli approach is “something special,” she said. “It develops their IQs, but not only their IQs.”

By next September, some of Azerbaijan's schools will have begun integrating robotics, with the curricula written by Israeli educators. Further collaboration in science education, including aerodynamics, has been proposed.

Said Lenk: “There's a benefit in sharing core skills and seeing each other as friends.” ■

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Intel to invest \$10B on new Israeli headquarters

Intel announced a \$10-billion investment in a new plant in the city of Kiryat Gat, Israel (part of JUF's Partnership Together region) that is expected to create some 1,000 jobs over the next few years. Intel Vice President Daniel Benatar and Intel Israel CEO Yaniv Garty informed Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon and Economic Minister Eli Cohen that the company's management chose Israel over Ireland or Singapore. Israel will contribute about \$1 billion, or 10 percent of the cost, over the next 15 years. -Gad Lior, YNet