

## Remember the Hanukkah party at Trump's hotel? Azerbaijani envoy doesn't get the kerfuffle

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By Ron Kampeas

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Elin Suleymanov, Azerbaijan's ambassador to Washington, attending AIPAC's annual conference in Washington, D.C., March 26, 2017. (Ron Kampeas)

(JTA) – Elin Suleymanov likes Jews, but can't figure them out: What was all that noise about when his embassy hosted a Hanukkah party at the Trump International Hotel?

“That exposed some strange divisions” in the Jewish community, the Azerbaijani ambassador said in an interview Sunday at this year's AIPAC policy conference.

[Memories of the Dec. 16 controversy](#), which included livid statements from Jewish groups angry at the involvement of their umbrella body, the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, make Suleymanov's eyes crinkle in bemusement.

Liberal Jewish groups, most prominently the Reform movement, boycotted the party, saying that patronizing the hotel so soon after the election looked like brown-nosing and flouted concerns that Trump would profit from countries and groups that would petition him as president.

The brouhaha also cast, at least briefly, an unfavorable light on Israel's close ties with the Muslim country, one bordering Iran to boot. It was a relationship that Israel has touted as a breakthrough. This is why Suleymanov was at the American Israel Public Affairs Committee conference, speaking about Israel's "growing relationships" in the Caucasus.

"I still don't understand why people got so worked up," Suleymanov said. "It [the hotel] was chosen purely on a best offer basis."

Suleymanov claimed to be working with restrictive criteria: He needed a room walking distance from the White House and at a time between two White House Hanukkah parties scheduled for the same day. That left three options, he said, but kosher caterers nixed one of the hotels, leaving two: one priced the party at \$24,000, the other at \$12,000. He chose the latter – Trump International.

Perhaps Suleymanov is right and he couldn't get a better offer – but the anger was directed more at the Presidents Conference for agreeing to co-host the event and putting a Jewish communal hechsher on the location. That baffles the ambassador even more. Fourteen ambassadors, most from Muslim majority countries and entities – including the Palestinian Authority – were presented with commemorative menorahs for assisting Israel put down raging forest fires last year.

"The Turkish and the Greek ambassadors were standing next to one another, and you had the PLO ambassador, Maen Areikat, standing next to Ron Dermer," Israel's ambassador, Suleymanov recalled. "It's such a beautiful thing, to bring the Israeli and Palestinian ambassadors into a room to celebrate a Jewish holiday."

At least one Presidents Conference constituent, the Workmen's Circle, also slammed the joint hosting because of Azerbaijan's human rights record, which includes reports of what the U.S. State Department called "arbitrary arrest and detention and politically motivated imprisonment."

Suleymanov is too polished to brush away these concerns. He paused and considered a moment, looking pained.

"Is any society perfect?" he asked. "Azerbaijan is just 25 years old."

Suleymanov suggested that some of the complaints coming from the Obama administration were naïve, not taking into account Islamist challenges to Azerbaijan's secular political culture.

He anticipated smoother relations with the United States under Trump – with the caveat that Trump has yet to fill a passel of important foreign policy posts, leaving many countries wondering what the details of a working U.S. relationship would look like.

"We are very hopeful, it's a new beginning, the pronouncements by the leadership in this administration have been more pragmatic and more interest based," he said.

"Interest based" is also how Suleymanov characterized the relationship with Israel, which includes the sale of Azerbaijani oil to Israel and Israeli arms and information technology sales to Azerbaijan, although he added, "We appreciate the friendship and support with the State of Israel."

It's a relationship that costs Azerbaijan in its efforts to calm relations with its neighbor Iran, with which it shares a faith, Shia Islam, and which also hosts a considerable Azerbaijani minority.

"It's no secret the visit of the Israeli prime minister did not make the Iranians happy," Suleymanov said, referring to Benjamin Netanyahu's tour late last year.

Suleymanov was happy to explain these nuances to a reporter, but wondered why AIPAC did not allow media into the panel on Israel and the Caucasus he just completed. AIPAC, it was explained to him, keeps some panels off the record to justify the hundreds of dollars it charges activists attending the conference.

"They paid extra to listen to me?" he mused. "I really thought Jews were smart."

