

THE PROCESS OF DEVELOPMENT OF ARMENIAN-SYRIAN RELATIONS FROM 1991 TO THE PRESENT DAY

Vahe Aghasaryan

PhD in political science
Armenian-Russian University
RA, Yerevan, Hovsep Emin St. 123
Email: v.aghasar@gmail.com
ORCID: 0009-0006-9961-744X

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Abstract

Syria holds one of the key positions in the Middle East; geopolitical, economic, and cultural significance of the Syrian Arab Republic may contribute to reinforcing national interests of the Republic of Armenia both in the Middle East and in the whole arab world. Recent developments around Palestine and Israel demonstrated that the processes in the Middle East continue to play fundamental role in the international security system. Diplomatic, political and financial support of the majority of muslim states for the arab people of Palestine indicates the relevance of this issue for the regional countries. Geopolitical shifts in the Middle East may lead to the emergence of new opportunities for development of cooperation between Armenia and the regional states displaying negative attitude towards the support of Azerbaijan and Turkey to Israel.

Key words – bilateral relations, Syria, Republic of Armenia, Middle East, regional/international security, Syrian crisis, foreign policy.

Introduction

Establishment of diplomatic relations between Armenia and Syria that immediately followed the declaration of independence of the Republic of Armenia vividly demonstrates the existence of time-tested historical connections of two nations.

Armenian-Syrian relations have a rooted historical foundation. Dating back to ancient times, Armenian and Syrian peoples have established cooperation in various fields leaving behind a legacy of effective collaboration.

Historical background

Throughout many decades the contemporary borders of Syria have been recognized as one of the preeminent trade and cultural hubs of the Middle East. Since antiquity Armenians have settled in this region: During that time there have been relatively minor presence of the Armenians in northern regions of Syria. Under the rule of Tigran the Great, Armenians invaded Syria, making historical Antioch one among the quartet of capital cities of the Armenian Empire.

Armenians have continued to reside in this region starting from the beginning of the Byzantine Era¹.

After adoption of Christianity as an official religion in Armenia, Christian centers of Greater Syria such as Antioch, Jerusalem, Nisibis and Edessa became main destinations for Armenian pilgrims and merchants. Firm ties were among Armenians and Syrian Christian congregations in the post apostolic era.

Historically amicable relations between Syrians and Armenians unveiled when local population of Aleppo, Raqqa, Deir Zor, Damascus and elsewhere in the region landed a helpful hand and warmly welcomed Armenians who survived the horrors of the Armenian Genocide. As a result of the resettlement of Armenians in the region, they reshaped and created a strong Armenian community that has its own influence on bilateral relations between Armenia and Syria².

This study aims at examining political, economic, security, cultural and religious factors that have an impact and shape relations between the two nations.

Establishment of diplomatic relations

A new chapter has commenced in the Armenian-Syrian relations in the early 1990s, when Armenia declared independence on 21 September 1991, entered the international arena as a sovereign state and embarked on establishing diplomatic relations with the outer world. Syria was one of the first states that rapidly responded to this event of historical significance for Armenians officially recognizing the independence of the Republic of Armenia on 28 December 1991³. Diplomatic relations between the two states were established on 6 March 1992 according to an agreement signed in Damascus. In Yerevan and Damascus the embassies of the two states opened respectively. The Armenian Embassy in the capital of Syria was opened in November 1992 and, The Syrian Embassy in the capital of Armenia opened its doors in 1997. Moreover, the Consulate General of the Republic of Armenia in Aleppo was established in 1993 since Armenia and Syria were attaching great importance to their bilateral relations, inter alia, taking into consideration the presence and the influence of the Armenian diaspora⁴.

Bilateral ties between Armenia and Syria promptly gained significance since the two leaders of the time considered relations between their countries not only friendly but of strategic nature.

¹ Shoup 2018, 6, "Syria has several other ethnic groups, the Kurds... they make up an estimated 9 percent... Turkomen comprise around 4-5 percent of the total population. The rest of the ethnic mix of Syria is made of Assyrians (about 4 percent), Armenians (about 2 percent), and Circassians (about 1 percent)".

² "Syria", Office of the high commissioner for diaspora affairs.

³ Hovhannisyan 2007, 548-549.

⁴ Bilateral Relations, MFA of the RA.

Only four months after the recognition of the independence of Armenia by Syria, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, the first president of the Republic undertook an official visit to Syrian Arab Republic.

Since the declaration of Independence of Armenia, more than 70 various agreements, protocols and memorandums have been signed with Syria, regulating bilateral relations in political, economic, cultural, scientific and religious fields⁵.

Economic aspect

Economic aspect played an important role in the agenda of bilateral relations between the two nations. At the beginning of the establishment of relations, trade between them can be characterized as modest. Both countries were facing economic challenges. However there were attempts to strengthen cooperation. At the time broader geopolitical events had a negative influence on their economic and trade relations. At the beginning of the 20th century economic ties were quite limited. Starting from 2008 the situation changed and economic relations began to gradually evolve.

As of the current date several economic documents were signed between the two countries including Agreement on trade, economic, scientific and technical cooperation between the Ministry of Industry of the Republic of Armenia and the Ministry of Industry of the Syrian Arab Republic in December, 1992 and Agreement on economic, scientific and technical cooperation between the Government of the Republic of Armenia and the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic in April, 1995⁶.

Unfortunately, throughout 10 years of military actions the economy of the Syrian Arab republic had faced considerable challenges. Civilian infrastructure had been destroyed, (roads, water pumping and supply facilities, factories, educational centres, hospitals, electricity distribution networks), agricultural land has sharply decreased along with the shortage of fuel, brain drain. etc.

For the past several years Syria has endured challenging and complex periods. Socio-economic and financial situations have worsened, humanitarian needs have increased and massive economic reconstruction has not even started.

According to the World Bank data, Syrian GDP has been declining since 2018⁷, primarily as a result of unilateral Western sanctions (Caesar Act 2019), the economic and financial crisis in Lebanon, increased pressure on Iran, the COVID-19 pandemic and the recent earthquake. Over the past year the Syrian currency has experienced a significant depreciation shifting from 4,000 Syrian

⁵ Bilateral Relations, MFA of the RA.

⁶ Bilateral Relations, MFA of the RA.

⁷ The World Bank 2024.

Pounds per one USD to 8,000. Moreover, 15.3 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance⁸ (700 thousand people (5%) more than in 2022 and almost 2 million (14%) more than in 2021⁹). According to some Syrians, life in the country today is worse than it was amidst the active confrontation of 2016-2017.

It is important to stress that the current economic situation in Syria is a result of various factors and it is hard (if not impossible) to assess which one has played the main and significant role. Additionally, there are a series of issues that impede the reconstruction and economic recovery.

Taking into account the poor economic situation in Syria arising from the conflict, we should note that there have been several developments in the economic relations between Armenia and Syria during the last several years. Throughout the recent 24 years Armenia's exports to Syria have shown a steady annual growth rate of 5.94%, rising from 2.73 million USD in 1997 to 10.9 million USD in 2021. In 2021, Armenia's exports to Syria totaled 10.9 million USD, with the primary product being Rolled Tobacco accounting for 10.8 million USD. Other noteworthy export items are Semiconductor Devices contributing 56.500 USD and Hard Liquor reaching 36.700 USD. Correspondingly, Syria's exports to Armenia have seen a consistent increase rate of 8.79%, commencing at 91.900 USD in 1997 and reaching to 694.000 USD in 2021. In 2021 the leading export products were Packaged Medicaments valued at 254.000 USD, Sauces and Seasonings with a total of 73.400 USD, and Pure Olive Oil at 49.500 USD¹⁰.

RA External trade data¹¹

In thousand USD

<i>Country</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Export</i>	<i>Import (countries of origin)</i>	<i>Import (country of consignment)</i>
Syrian Arab Republic	2019	56657.7668	538.80331	537.97477
Syrian Arab Republic	2020	31242.20361	368.03912	360.4808
Syrian Arab Republic	2021	10922.50371	731.52889	709.6792
Syrian Arab Republic	2022	5639.51734	1128.52809	867.29907

⁸ Syrian Arab Republic: 2023 Humanitarian Needs Overview (December 2022).

⁹ 2021 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic (March 2021).

¹⁰ Armenia (ARM) and Syria (SYR) Trade | OEC - The Observatory of Economic Complexity.

¹¹ External trade database, Statistical Committee of the Republic of Armenia.

Security and Strategic aspect

The Syrian crisis, which began in 2011, from an internal political conflict rapidly transformed into an international one as a result of both short-sighted policy of the country's leadership and the gross interference of regional and non-regional powers, which were largely facilitated by the diverse national and confessional composition of the population of the Syrian Arab Republic. Currently, the Syrian crisis, being one of the most complex and protracted geopolitical problems in the region, in turn, has become a catalyst for the aggravation of the Kurdish problem, which will play an important role in the acute geopolitical struggle for the New Middle East. It is obvious that the Syrian crisis risks turning into one of the most intractable geopolitical problems in the Middle East, given the multitude of both internal and external factors.

The Syrian conflict and the processes taking place in the Kurdish-populated territories are of enormous importance for the security of the Republic of Armenia and the Armenian people, since they are related to the strategic interests of the Republic of Armenia in the region.

Today, the somewhat stabilized peace and the partial restoration of the country's most important infrastructures have given Armenians the opportunity to return to Syria. In turn, the Syrian authorities, as well as the Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia, have taken over the urgent mission of restoring the Syrian-Armenian community as soon as possible.

Considering the fact that the Syrian conflict, transforming from a regional to an international one, has shown how important this region is in the context of international security. The interests of Iran, Turkey, Russia, the United States, Israel and other countries that are trying to strengthen their positions in the Middle East are currently represented in the Syrian Arab Republic. Taking into account the involvement of the above-mentioned actors, the Republic of Armenia, realizing the importance of these processes, in our opinion, should continue the process of strengthening and expanding bilateral relations with friendly Syria.

Kurdish issue

In fact, the Syrian Kurds, as a result of the civil war in Syria, managed to create their own bodies of self-government, an effective and well-organized army, consisting of both male and female units, which waged a very effective struggle against the Islamic State, as well as radical groups financed by Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other countries.

The Syrian conflict, despite its catastrophic consequences for the Syrian Arab Republic itself, has become an unprecedented moment in the history of the Syrian Kurds.

The Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) became the sole political entity with control over the most important process of forming the autonomy of Syrian Kurdistan, due to the inefficacy and fragmentation of other Kurdish political organizations in Syria.

The PYD played a fundamental role in effectively organizing Kurdish forces to defend the population against radical Islamist groups. This circumstance played an important role in the regional and global policies of the states involved in the Syrian crisis.

The Kurdish People's Protection Units have become the main strategic partner of the United States in the fight against the Islamic State and the liberation of Syrian territories on the eastern side of the Euphrates River. At the same time, the US-Kurdish alliance in Syria has become one of the most complex issue in relations between the US and Turkey.

The Syrian conflict and the processes taking place in Kurdistan (Syrian and Iraqi) are of vital importance for the security of the Republic of Armenia and the Armenian people, as they are related to the strategic interests of the Republic of Armenia in the region.

Foreign policy processes for the creation of Kurdistan can open up great prospects for the active engagement of the Republic of Armenia at diverse levels and directions (Armenian-Russian, Armenian-US, Armenian-Syrian, within the Arab League, UN, etc.). The above mentioned processes will also be able to provide Yerevan with a wide diplomatic field of activity, the opportunity to influence certain processes and achieve a goal of crucial importance; strengthening the position of the Republic of Armenia in Middle Eastern affairs and, as a result, participating in the process of resolving the Syrian conflict, as a country that has accepted a large number of refugees from Syria and as representative of the people who suffered great physical, material and spiritual losses arising from this bloody conflict.

Significance of the Middle Eastern region for the Republic of Armenia was ensured in the National Strategy of Armenia in 2007. "Relations with the countries of the Middle East are important for Armenia given both the regions proximity and the impact of developments in the Middle East on broader international politics. Reflecting Armenias centuries-old links to the countries of the Middle East, there are still numerous Armenian communities throughout the region, that have long contributed to the social, political, economic and cultural development of the region and its constituent states. Armenia will continue to develop its relations and cooperation with its traditional partner states in the Middle East

and will strive to give new impetus to developing trade and economic relations with the Arabic countries of the Gulf and the Mediterranean regions"¹².

Furthermore, after the revolution of 2018, in the National Security Strategy of Armenia of 2020 was enshrined the following: "Armenia's security environment is also affected by processes underway in the Middle East, which include, in particular, the expulsion of religious and ethnic minorities, the consolidation and spread of religious radicalism, internal conflicts, wars of attrition, and non-traditional and proxy warfare. Continuously expanding our cooperation with Middle Eastern states is among our priorities. Armenia must be involved in reforming the regional security system of the Middle East, aimed also at securing the historical presence of Armenians in the region"¹³.

The Syrian Arab Republic traditionally supports Armenia in the conflict with Azerbaijan and Turkey.

Note: *Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad accused Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of being the main instigator in the deadliest fighting between Armenian and Azeri forces for more than 25 years. Turkey has denied involvement in the fighting in and around Nagorno-Karabakh, a mountain enclave that belongs to Azerbaijan under international law but is governed by ethnic Armenians, and has dismissed accusations that it sent mercenaries to the area. But Assad told Russian news agency RIA: "He (Erdogan) ...was the main instigator and the initiator of the recent conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh between Azerbaijan and Armenia". Reiterating accusations first levelled by French President Emmanuel Macron that Turkey has sent Syrian militants to fight in the conflict, Assad said: "Damascus can confirm this". Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said during a visit to Azerbaijan's capital, Baku, on Tuesday that international peace efforts had achieved no concrete results in decades and a ceasefire alone would not end the fighting. "The whole world now needs to understand this cannot go on like this", Cavusoglu said¹⁴.*

Sources closer to the head of the Syrian National Security Bureau Major General Ali Mamlouk, reports that intelligence services of the Syrian Arab Republic are going to transfer to Armenia information about mercenaries of pro-Turkish gangs¹⁵ on the occupied Syrian territories by Turkey that can be transferred to Azerbaijan in case of war¹⁶.

¹² National Security Strategy of the Republic of Armenia 2007.

¹³ National Security Strategy of the Republic of Armenia 2020.

¹⁴ Assad Blames Turkey for Nagorno-Karabakh Fighting.

¹⁵ According to sources within the Syrian National Army (SNA), the umbrella term for a group of opposition militias backed by Turkey, around 1,500 Syrians have so far been deployed to the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region in the southern Caucasus. It's the latest proxy standoff between Turkey and Russia, which are already on opposing sides in Syria and Libya. Ankara has declared strong support for

It is important to note that the head of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service Sergei Naryshkin, the President of France Emmanuel Macron and Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad warned about the presence of "Al-Hamza Division", "Sultan Murad" and "Jabhat al-Nusra" (Organization banned in the Russian Federation) in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone¹⁷.

Humanitarian cooperation

Syrian Crisis

At the beginning of 2018, the Republic of Armenia sent a group of Armenian specialists to Syria, consisting of 83 people, to conduct mine clearance, provide medical assistance to the victims, as well as military personnel to ensure the safety of the specialists¹⁸. This decision was made taking into account the difficult humanitarian situation that has developed in Syria as a result of military operations: the Syrian side sent several written appeals and, taking into account the presence of the Armenian diaspora in Aleppo, Armenia, in accordance with UN Security Council resolution N 2393 and N 2401, made decision to provide humanitarian assistance to the Armenian population of Aleppo¹⁹.

Earthquake in Syria

In Syria, as a result of the earthquake that occurred on February 6, 2023, at least 1,444 people were killed and about 3.5 thousand were injured, Reuters writes, citing the latest data from the Syrian government and rescuers working in areas out of Damascus control. The Syrian Ministry of Health reported that in the provinces of Aleppo, Latakia, Hama, Idlib and Tartus, 711 people were killed and 1,431 were injured²⁰.

The humanitarian aid sent to Syria by the order of the President of the Republic of Armenia reached Aleppo and was handed over to the Syrian Armenian Emergency Relief and Rehabilitation Authority to provide assistance to all families in need, regardless of their nationality²¹.

The humanitarian aid weighing 40 tons was previously transported by two airplanes from Yerevan to the Russian Hmeimim military base in Latakia. Some of the aid went to the people of Latakia, Kessab, Tartus and Damascus, and the

Azerbaijan, while Moscow is traditionally closer to Armenia, Syrians Make Up Turkey's Proxy Army in Nagorno-Karabakh, Liz Cookman, Foreign Policy.

¹⁶ Сирия начнет передавать разведданные Армении на случай новой войны в Карабахе.

¹⁷ Сирия начнет передавать разведданные Армении на случай новой войны в Карабахе.

¹⁸ «Armenia sends more mine-clearing experts, doctors to Syria».

¹⁹ «Армения провела ротацию гуманитарной миссии в сирийском Алеппо».

²⁰ Rescuers dig through rubble as Turkey-Syria quake death toll passes 7,800.

²¹ Հայաստանից Սիրիա առաքված մարդասիրական օգնությունը կտրամադրվի կարիքավորներին՝ անկախ ազգությունից:

majority reached Aleppo to be distributed to all Syrians in need. The Minister of Local Self-Government and Environmental Protection of the Arab Republic, Hussein Makhoul, expressed their gratitude to Armenia²².

On February 23, in Damascus, the President of the Syria Bashar al-Assad received the Foreign Minister of the Republic of Armenia Ararat Mirzoyan. They discussed the situation created in the regions affected by the disaster in Syria and the work aimed at resolving the ongoing problems. Armenian-Syrian bilateral relations, as well as regional and international security issues were addressed. The Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia presented to the President of Syria the latest developments in the normalization process of Armenia-Azerbaijan relations, as well as the humanitarian crisis created by Azerbaijan's illegal blockade of the only road connecting Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia and to the world, the Lachin Corridor²³.

Conclusion

Relations between the Republic of Armenia and the Syrian Arab Republic, based on mutual respect and trust, have been developing for decades for the benefit of the peoples of the two countries. Damascus and Yerevan are developing cooperation in the fields of security, culture and economy. Given the current unstable security situation of the Syrian Arab Republic and the Republic of Armenia, Damascus and Yerevan are presently unable to exploit the full potential of their bilateral relations. In our opinion, Syria, occupying one of the key places both geopolitically and economically, can play a vital role in strengthening the international positions of the Republic of Armenia both within the Middle East and within the entire Arab world.

The fact that Syria has restored its membership in the League of Arab States²⁴, may have effective consequences for Armenia if Yerevan successfully implements its diplomatic goals in the context of strengthening its geopolitical interests and developing relations with Arab countries, Iran and other important actors in the Middle East.

Recent events in Israel and the Gaza Strip have demonstrated that the Middle East has not lost its fundamental role in the global security system. The diplomatic, political and financial support of most Muslim countries provided to the Arab people of Palestine once again proves the significance of utilizing the moment wisely, in the context of the weakening position of Azerbaijan within the

²² Syria thanked Armenia and other countries for providing assistance after earthquake (Ilurer.am).

²³ The meeting between the Foreign Minister of Armenia and the President of Syria, MFA of the Republic of Armenia.

²⁴ "Analysis: How important is Syria's return to the Arab League?", Al Jazeera.

Muslim world, which, being a strategic partner of Israel, suffers image losses by supporting Israel and increasing oil supplies²⁵.

The Syrian Arab Republic and the Republic of Armenia have many points of contact in their geopolitical interests, the implementation of which will allow Yerevan and Damascus to strengthen their positions in order to counter external threats, which will certainly increase due to the worsening political situation in the Middle East.

It is important to note that Azerbaijan's strategic cooperation with Israel, which entails the hostility of most Arab states, provides new common ground for Armenian-Syrian cooperation. For centuries, the peoples of Syria and Armenia have made a significant contribution to the development of the culture and economy of the Middle East. In this context, Yerevan and Damascus have several fundamental points of convergence of interests:

1. Turkey (Ankara has occupied the Northern Syria and supports Azerbaijan in its aggressive policy against Armenia)

2. Azerbaijan (cooperates with Israel, supplying it with oil resources)

3. The Kurdish factor (one of the most complex issues in the Middle East, which affects both Damascus (to a greater extent) and Yerevan)

4. Iran, which has common core interests with both Syria and Armenia in the context of strengthening its security, changing the architecture of the Middle East as part of strengthening pro-Iranian cells and preventing Israel from reconciling with the Sunni monarchies of the Persian Gulf.

It is also worth noting that Yerevan and Damascus are the world centers of the birth and establishment of Christianity. In this context, it is important to mention that the civilizational component of Armenian-Syrian cooperation also plays an important role in the context of preserving the spiritual and cultural image of the Middle East.

Summarizing the above, we can assume that for the entire period since the establishment of diplomatic relations, bilateral cooperation between Armenia and Syria, based on strong historical and cultural ties, has unrealized potential that should be effectively fulfilled.

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Վահե Աղասարյան

Ամփոփում

Սիրիայի Արաբական Հանրապետությունը, գտնվելով Մերձավոր Արևելքի աշխարհաքաղաքական, տնտեսական կարևոր տարածքում, կարող է կենսական նշանակություն ունենալ Հայաստանի Հանրապետության միջազգային դիրքերը ամրապնդելու հարցում ինչպես Մերձավոր Արևելքում, այնպես էլ ողջ արաբական աշխարհում:

Պաղեստինի և Իսրայելի շուրջ տեղի ունեցած վերջին իրադարձությունները փաստում են, որ Մերձավոր Արևելքում կատարվող գործընթացները շարունակում են հիմնարար դեր խաղալ միջազգային անվտանգության համակարգում: Մահմեդական երկրների մեծ մասի դիվանագիտական, քաղաքական և ֆինանսական աջակցությունը Պաղեստինի արաբ ժողովրդին ցույց է տալիս այս խնդրի արդիականությունը տարածաշրջանի երկրների համար: Մերձավոր Արևելքում աշխարհաքաղաքական փոփոխությունները կարող են հանգեցնել Հայաստանի և տարածաշրջանի այն երկրների միջև համագործակցության զարգացման նոր հնարավորությունների ստեղծմանը, որոնք բացասաբար են վերաբերվում Ադրբեջանի և Թուրքիայի՝ Իսրայելին ցուցաբերած աջակցությանը:

Բանալի բառեր՝ երկկողմ հարաբերություններ, Սիրիա, Հայաստանի Հանրապետություն, Մերձավոր Արևելք, տարածաշրջանային և միջազգային անվտանգություն, սիրիական ճգնաժամ, արտաքին քաղաքականություն:

ПРОЦЕСС РАЗВИТИЯ АРМЯНО-СИРИЙСКИХ ОТНОШЕНИЙ С 1991 ГОДА ПО НАСТОЯЩЕЕ ВРЕМЯ

Ваге Агасарян

Резюме

Сирия занимает одно из ключевых мест на Ближнем Востоке: геополитическая, экономическая и культурная значимость САР может способствовать ук-

реплению интересов Республики Армения как на Ближнем Востоке, так и во всем арабском мире. Последние события вокруг Палестины и Израиля продемонстрировали, что процессы на Ближнем Востоке продолжают играть фундаментальную роль в международной системе безопасности. Дипломатическая, политическая и финансовая поддержка большинства мусульманских стран, оказанная арабскому народу Палестины, говорит об актуальности данной проблемы для стран региона. Геополитические изменения на Ближнем Востоке могут привести к созданию новых возможностей для развития сотрудничества между Арменией и странами региона, которые негативно относятся к поддержке Израиля со стороны Азербайджана и Турции.

Ключевые слова – двусторонние отношения, Сирия, Республика Армения, Средний Восток, региональная и международная безопасность, сирийский кризис, внешняя политика.