

## ARMENIA AND SYRIA - WHAT SHAPES THE RELATIONS?<sup>1</sup>\*

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### **Abstract**

*The article discusses the major tendencies of the development of Armenian-Syrian relations during the last 30 years based on the primary sources, including the archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Armenia, other official documents, and statistical data. The research is an attempt to explain what determines the relations between the two countries and the dynamics of these relations. It represents political, economic and social factors determining the relationship between Armenia and Syria.*

**Keywords:** *Armenia, Syria, bilateral relations, interests, Armenian community, politics, economy, trade, Turkey, the Syrian war.*

### **Introduction**

After declaring its independence in 1991, the Republic of Armenia initiated the establishment of diplomatic relations with other countries. Among various regions and countries, the newly independent state launched diplomatic activities in the Middle East. The Syrian Arab Republic was one of the first states to recognize the independence of Armenia and to build relations with the latter.

In Armenian perceptions, Syria and the Syrian people have always been portrayed as a friendly state and people, and this image is based upon traditional ties, the presence of the Armenian community in Syria, thousands of Armenian repatriates and the noble treatment of the Syrian people towards the Armenians in the period of the Armenian Genocide, as their help saved tens of thousands of lives of Armenians and gave a new shelter in the country.

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One noteworthy fact in the Armenian-Syrian relations is the visit of the Syrian president Hafez al-Assad to the Armenian SSR in 1980, when he paid a visit to the Soviet Union.

The Armenian-Arab, Armenian-Syrian ties, the relationship between Armenia and Syria, various aspects of these relations have always been in the frame of the research interests of Armenian scholars and have predominantly studied in light of the friendly nature of these relations. The historical factor has a unique place in the discourse of bilateral relations. Historical realities have played a certain role in the relations between the independent republic of Armenia and the Arab countries and especially in the development of the Armenian-Syrian relations. The factor of the Armenian community in Syria has also influenced political decisions adopted in Armenia concerning bilateral relations, such as the opening of consulates in Syrian Aleppo and Deir ez-Zor, the continuation of the work of the Armenian diplomatic representations during the Syrian war, etc.

The research is an attempt to represent various dimensions, political, economic and social, determining the relations between the two countries. The social dimension includes traditional ties, contacts between the societies and the Armenian community in Syria. In the 1990s, the economic component had an important place in the bilateral agenda. However, because of the blockade imposed by Turkey and the outbreak of the war in Syria, later hindered economic cooperation. The political aspect of relations includes the search for mutual interests in various issues. Both countries have maintained close relations with Russia and Iran. Besides, there have been some elements of cooperation concerning Turkey. Two countries have cooperated in international organizations assisting and promoting each other's attitudes, positions and candidates. As for Armenia, the issue of recognition of the Armenian genocide has been essential, as well.

### **Setting the context**

There is plenty of literature and publications addressing the historical context of Armenian-Arab relations. It is no exaggeration to argue that the Armenian diaspora has a certain impact on the foreign policy decision making

process in Armenia. Syria and the Middle East as a whole are considered to be the core of the Armenian diaspora, which keeps alive the traditions, language and culture of the western part of their homeland. While agreeing with the role of the presence of the Armenian factor in foreign countries, as well as the historical narratives, in this article we skip the discussion of this phenomenon and focus on the political and economic issues in the relations between Armenia and Syria.

The main imperatives of the Armenian foreign policy since 1991 have been the Nagorno Karabakh question and the international recognition of the Armenian genocide. The Republic of Armenia allied itself with Russia and became a member of Russia-led organizations, like the CSTO, EEU, CIS. At the same time, Armenia declared the course of European integration and building closer relations with key European countries and the USA. Before 1991, Syria was a close partner to the Soviet Union. Syria was in the forefront of the pan-Arab movements, advocated the case of the Palestinians in the Arab-Israeli conflict, and was involved in the political processes and military conflicts in the neighboring states. Syria has been critical of US regional policy. Since 2011, many Western and Arab countries have cut official relations with the Assad regime and imposed sanctions on it. Armenia and Syria have foreign policy priorities distant from each other. However, there are other situations where the interests of these countries coincide.

### **The period of the establishment of relations**

Chronologically, the relations between Armenia and Syria can be divided into 3 periods: the establishment of relations, the freezing of relations and the restart period, which also correspond to the administration of the three Armenian presidents, although are not determined by them, as the Republic of Armenia has always maintained a good level of relations and the Armenian policy towards Syria has been continuous<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Armenia, except for a short period in the mid-2000s, was represented in Syria at the level of Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, and the level of the Syrian representative was sometimes reduced to the level of a caretaker.

In 1991, immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Republic of Armenia and the Syrian Arab Republic started to build relations and expand ties in various fields. On December 28, 1991, Syria officially recognized the independence of Armenia, and on March 6, 1992, the two countries signed an agreement on establishing diplomatic relations<sup>3</sup>. In November 1992, the embassy of Armenia was opened in Damascus, and Syria's embassy in Yerevan has been operating since September 1997. Parallely with the deepening of bilateral relations, the states signed another agreement on opening an Armenian consulate general in Aleppo. And in 2010, the third Armenian consulate started to operate in Deir ez-Zor<sup>4</sup>. Until 2019, Syria was the only Arab country where Armenia had more than one diplomatic representation<sup>5</sup>.

On 25-27 April, 1992, the first president of Armenia, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, paid a visit to Syria. The Armenian delegation was met with a high-class diplomatic reception. The president of Syria, Hafez al-Assad, welcomed Ter-Petrosyan at the airport. Other senior officials, spiritual leaders of the Armenian community and the representatives of various Armenian national organizations were also present at the welcoming ceremony<sup>6</sup>. Later, president Ter-Petrosyan appreciated the visit as very constructive and effective. The visit of the Armenian president was highlighted in the official circles of Syria and was assessed as historic<sup>7</sup>.

In the 1990s, the economic component had an important place in the bilateral agenda. In these years Syrian economy, which had been heavily dependent on the Soviet aid, was in crisis due to the halt of financial flows on the one hand and international sanctions on the other. The planned, inefficient economy with large state participation, faced serious difficulties<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> **Bilateral relations**, <https://www.mfa.am/hy/bilateral-relations/sy>

<sup>4</sup> **Armenia-Syria, bilateral relations**, <https://www.mfa.am/hy/bilateral-relations/sy>.

<sup>5</sup> Armenia opened its consulates in Dubai in 2019 and in Erbil in 2021.

<sup>6</sup> During the visit the Syrian press wrote that Syria is a homeland for three acting presidents, Hafez al-Assad, Levon Ter-Petrosyan and the President of Argentina, Carlos Menem.

<sup>7</sup> «**Hayastani Hanrapet'ut'yun**» **oratert**, 20.10.1994.

<sup>8</sup> More about the Syrian economy in 1980s see **Volker Perthes** 1992: 37-58

Syria was interested in receiving engineering and professional assistance which it had from the Soviet Union in the previous decades.

In its turn, newly independent Armenia was in a harsh economic condition because of the earthquake in 1988, the war (ended in 1994), the change of the economic system and the transition to free market relations. Nevertheless, the professional capabilities and the production capacities of the Republic of Armenia were of serious interest to Syria. In particular, Syria was interested in Armenia's heavy, chemical industry and electrotechnological field. Because of the sanctions, Syria did not have many options for buying spare parts for its infrastructure, and Armenia was a possible supply market<sup>9</sup>.

For its part, Armenia, taking into account its experience in the field of science and technology, sought to participate in the projects for the construction or repair of the infrastructure in Syria. In the 1990s, Armenia negotiated the participation of its companies in railway, energy and other projects. Major ones included the construction of sections of the railway in northern Syria, the planning of the Damascus metro, and the re-equipment of dams and reservoirs.

However, the limited finances, bigger and more influential competitors left no chances for the Armenian companies to win tenders. Particularly, the Russian companies were winning the majority of tenders in the energy sector considering the debt of Damascus to Moscow reaching 12 billion USD. In this sphere, the companies from the Gulf region which were investing in Syria's economy competed with the Russian companies. In 1997, an Armenian delegation led by the minister of transport visited Damascus to hold negotiations on the planned construction of the Damascus metro line. However, the Syrian side preferred to sign a memorandum with the representatives of the Teheran metro<sup>10</sup>. It demonstrated the regional influence of the greater states with whom Armenia was not capable of competing.

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<sup>9</sup> **HDA of the MFA of the RA**, case 254, list I, p. 47: The construction of Damascus metro has not started as of 2021.

<sup>10</sup> **HDA of the MFA of the RA**, case 150, list II, p. 111.

Armenia, with a shortage of food and other goods, was in search of cheap import markets, and Syria was a suitable candidate. However, Turkey's blockade of Armenia since 1993 significantly hindered overland and railway communication between Armenia and Syria. It extended and complicated trade routes, making the import of Syrian goods more expensive compared with other countries.

In the 1990s, the logistic obstacles, financial and economic problems in both countries impeded mutual investments. Similarly, trade was affected: in 2000, the trade volumes between Armenia and Syria barely reached 1.8 million USD and from this the export from Armenia was 0.1 million USD, export from Syria was 1.7 million USD<sup>11</sup>.

The trade between RA and SAR in 1995-2000 according to the Statistical Committee of the RA.

|      | Exports<br>(thousand USD) | Imports |
|------|---------------------------|---------|
| 1995 | 286.7                     | 570.5   |
| 1996 | 200.4                     | 411.8   |
| 1997 | 2754.1                    | 4981.9  |
| 1998 | 1295.5                    | 3925.3  |
| 1999 | 12.1                      | 1755.5  |
| 2000 | 145.1                     | 1752.4  |

<sup>11</sup> **HDA of the MFA of the RA**, case 309, list VII, p. 74. In 1990s among the factors breaking the development of the economic relations between Armenia and Syria were the blockade imposed on Armenia by Turkey, Turkish-Syrian and Turkish-Armenian strained relations, the tough economic conditions in Armenia and Syria, underdeveloped financial and banking sectors in both countries which was a key obstacle for business deals, the economic protectionism in Syria, problems in communications, including launching regular flights. Particularly, the regular flight from Yerevan to Damascus failed to launch. These obstacles were too hard to overcome despite the experience of the Armenian community in trade. The Armenian businessmen offered their assistance to bring investments to Armenia, to establish regular cargo transportation routes, but they did not succeed, too.

In the 1990s, when Armenia was in difficult conditions, Syria provided humanitarian assistance several times. In 1992, the delivery of grain was of vital importance for Armenia as the country was in a severe food crisis. In 1995, Syria supplied Armenia with 7000 tonnes of fuel without compensation<sup>12</sup>. In 2000, notwithstanding the ban on the grain export, Syria provided 1000 tonnes of grain seeds and 500 tonnes of potato seeds to Armenia suffering from drought<sup>13</sup>. In this regard, in his message to the president Hafez al-Assad, the second president of Armenia, Robert Kocharyan, appreciated the Syrian people, the President, and also invited Syria to participate in the reconstruction of the disaster area in the north of Armenia<sup>14</sup>.

Since 1992, Armenia has been trying to prevent Azerbaijani efforts in the Arab countries to represent the Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts as it had a religious nature which would have been very dangerous for Armenia considering the ongoing war in the region.

It could have complicated Armenia's relations with Muslims, and particularly with the Arab world. The diplomats of Armenia always touched upon this issue to avert the use of the religious factor. For this purpose, Armenia was working not only in a bilateral format but also trying to benefit from their influence in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (formerly the Organization of the Islamic Conference) in order not to allow the fixing of Azerbaijan's position in its documents and declarations.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Syria and the presidency of the Parliament announced their position that the tough position of the OIC will hinder the peace process and blow the efforts of the OSCE Minsk Group to the conflict settlement<sup>15</sup>. In its turn, the Syrian government was seeking Armenia's support on the issues of the Arab-Israeli conflict, Palestine, Jerusalem and supporting its candidates on the international platforms.

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<sup>12</sup> HDA of the MFA of the RA, case 258, list I, p. 89.

<sup>13</sup> HDA of the MFA of the RA, case 309, list VII, p. 32.

<sup>14</sup> HDA of the MFA of the RA, case 51, list VI, p. 24.

<sup>15</sup> HDA of the MFA of the RA, case 151, list II, p. 130.

The educational and cultural relations between Armenia and Syria were developing relatively stable. During the Soviet Union period, hundreds of Syrian students studied in Armenian universities every year, and in the early 1990s both countries signed the student exchange agreement. With a short hiatus, the exchange program continued until 2011, when the war in Syria erupted. Cultural cooperation was quite intense, with frequent exhibitions, visits by cultural organizations, ensembles, organization of cultural days, festivals, and film screenings.

### **Cooling of the relations**

The factor of Turkey evolved into a serious problem for the development of Armenian-Syrian relations. In terms of political relations, the Syrian government was cautious about expanding its ties with Armenia both in the periods of strained relations with Turkey and when they were flourishing<sup>16</sup>.

Syria often refrained from sending high level delegations to Armenia considering the possible reaction from Ankara and the Turkish press capable of having a negative impact on Damascus. The number of visits, their representativeness speak for this argument. In the first decade of relations, the president, prime-minister, and a number of ministers of Armenia paid multiple visits to Syria, but not a single one from the Syrian side. In 1995-1996, the Armenian government sent 7 delegations to Syria, including the visit of the Armenian prime-minister and received only 2. Those two visits were at ministerial level. In the beginning of the 2000s the number of mutual visits was significantly reduced.

On June 10, 2000, Hafez al-Assad, the president of Syria, passed away. The delegation of the Republic of Armenia headed by president Robert Kocharyan attended the funeral. In his condolence telegram, the Armenian president stated: "Syria and the entire Arab people have lost one of the

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<sup>16</sup> For instance, the tension between Syrian and Turkey in 1998 on the Kurdish issue and the rapprochement of the 2000s. Syria was vulnerable especially to the water issue as the upper streams of the largest rivers flowing through the country, Euphrates and Tigris, are located in Turkish territory and Ankara was capable of creating serious problems through hydro engineering.

greatest politicians who has made a great contribution to shaping the modern history of the Arab world"<sup>17</sup>.

Bashar al-Assad, the son of Hafez al-Assad, came to succeed him as the president of Syria. The incumbent made a cautious attempt at political and economic reforms and liberalization. To combat hardships in the economy, Syria initiated a rapprochement with Turkey resulting in immediate growth of trade. The rapprochement of Syria and Turkey impacted the foreign policy of Syria, as well. Under Bashar al-Assad, relations between Syria and Turkey improved, especially with the Justice and Development Party which came to power in Turkey in 2002. The rapprochement of the two countries also had an impact on the relations between Syria and Armenia. After 2001 and until 2009, no visits were made at the level of presidents, prime ministers, and speakers of parliaments.

Two high rank visits took place in this period: on August 27, 2001, then the minister of defense of Armenia Serzh Sargsyan visited Syria and signed an agreement on military cooperation<sup>18</sup>. In the same year, the speakers of the parliaments of Armenia and Syria paid official visits to Damascus and Yerevan correspondingly.

In April 2006, the minister of foreign affairs of Armenia, Vardan Oskanyan, met Bashar al-Assad in Damascus. In December of the same year, Mukhlis Pharaoh, the Syrian chargé d'affaires in Yerevan, called his country "Armenia's Arab brother in the region." Commenting on the presence of the Armenian peacekeepers in Iraq, the diplomat said that "being an Arab, I am against Armenia's intervention in Iraq's military affairs, but as a diplomat, I am well aware of why Armenia appeared there"<sup>19</sup>.

From 2001 to 2008, the relations between Armenia and Syria cooled which was manifested in several spheres including the lowering of the

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<sup>17</sup> **Assad, Syria and Armenia: a snapshot of last 12 years**, 24.07.2012, <https://mediamax.am/en/news/region/5482/>

<sup>18</sup> **Agreement on military technical cooperation between the Government of RA and the Government of SAR** (August, 2001, Damascus), <https://www.mfa.am/en/bilateral-relations/sy>.

<sup>19</sup> **Assad, Syria and Armenia: a snapshot of last 12 years**

diplomatic rank of the Syrian representative from ambassador to charge d'affaires, significant reduction in the visits of official delegations, a short pause in educational and cultural cooperation, changes of the previous warm tone in congratulatory messages.

In the 2000s, trade and economic relations did not make significant progress and were limited to the activities of small and medium Armenian businesses. The factors that hindered the development of bilateral economic ties remained the same: the difficulty of land communication, the complicated bureaucratic arrangements for import and export in Syria, the difficulties of bank transfers and withdrawal of profits from Syria, the uncompetitive prices of goods, the lack of mutual interest.

In addition to sea and land communication, there were problems with air communication, as well. As of 2008 Syrian and Armenian airlines operated one flight a week, which however did not have the expected result<sup>20</sup>. The overall situation in Syria in the end of the 2000s also negatively impacted the Armenian community, as amid the intensification of external pressure on Syria and the growth of the extremist movements, the Armenian businessmen from Aleppo were concerned for their own capital, prompting them to turn their attention to Armenia<sup>21</sup>.

### **Restart of relations**

#### *Sargsyan's and Assad's visits: Restart of relations*

Armenia-Syria relations have improved since 2008. In the first quarter of 2009 first Edward Nalbandyan, Armenian foreign minister, paid an official visit to Syria and in June the Armenian side welcomed Syria's foreign minister Walid al-Muallem in Yerevan. In June 2009, Syria's president Bashar Al-Assad paid an official two-day visit to Armenia at his counterpart's invitation. This visit was parallel to the process of Armenia-Turkey reconciliation. And this somehow proved that the Syrian government, which had very close relations

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<sup>20</sup> **Interview with the ambassador of Armenia to Syria**, 25.09.2008, [http://www.noravank.am/arm/articles/detail.php?ELEMENT\\_ID=2346](http://www.noravank.am/arm/articles/detail.php?ELEMENT_ID=2346)

<sup>21</sup> **HAD of the MFA of the RA**, case 108, list 13, p. 41

with Turkey, then felt hands free in the context of its relationship with Armenia. During his visit, president al-Assad expressed his personal commitment to contributing to the process of reconciliation between Armenia and Turkey<sup>22</sup>:

During the negotiations, President Serzh Sargsyan highlighted the importance of Armenia-Syria relations and mentioned: “We have friendly relations with Syria. However, we consider the whole potential of our relationship has not been unleashed yet”. President Sargsyan underlined that he had an opportunity to visit Syria as Defense Minister of Armenia in 2001 and had very warm memories of Syria. President Sargsyan added that Armenia is very much interested in a completely new level of relations with Syria focusing on the economic dimension and, of course, this visit of President Assad was a good stimulus for updating and outlining future development of partnership between the two states”.

The President of Syria said that the Armenian community has powerful potential which would allow the two countries to find the ways to implement objectives set during this meeting. The President of Syria also highlighted the importance of establishing a conducive environment for the businessmen of the two countries and assured that the Syrian side would be persistent in that matter<sup>23</sup>. Notwithstanding the Armenian official protocol, the Syrian president did not visit the Tsitsernakaberd memorial. The intention not to harm relations with Turkey can explain this cautiousness.

Months later, on March 22, 2010, Armenia’s president, Serzh Sargsyan, arrived in Syria. Bashar al-Assad expressed his belief that mutual visits of the presidents would be a new impetus for enhancing Armenia-Syria relations. The presidents of Armenia and Syria praised the level of political dialogue

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<sup>22</sup> Shugaryan 2016: 121

<sup>23</sup> **President of the Syrian Arab Republic Bashar Al-Assad arrived to Armenia for a two-day official visit**, 17.06.2009, <https://www.president.am/en/press-release/item/2009/06/17/news-582/>

between the two countries. The Presidents of Armenia and Syria lauded the current level of the political dialogue between the two countries<sup>24</sup>.

Serzh Sargsyan and Bashar al-Assad touched upon the fulfillment of the agreements reached during Assad's visit to Yerevan, highlighting the necessity to intensify contacts between business circles which would facilitate economic and trade partnerships between the two friendly countries.

According to the official statement on the visit the President of Armenia discussed the deepening of the Armenian-Syrian economic cooperation, the importance of fostering relations in the economic area and the necessity of more active contacts between the business communities through the organization of expos, conferences, and similar events. President Sargsyan noted that the large Armenian community of Syria could become a facilitator of economic interaction<sup>25</sup>.

The visits of the foreign ministers and the presidents were an endeavor to give impetus to Armenian-Syrian relations. The new phase in Armenian-Syrian relations fits in with the Armenian policy of intensifying contacts with the Arab world. In its turn, Syria was freer in developing relations with Armenia during the normalization of Armenian-Turkish relations. The phase of renewal of relations could not remain unaffected by the war that started in Syria in 2011, and the crisis is still unresolved as of 2021.

### ***The Armenian genocide and Syria***

In 2020, Syria became the second Arab country after Lebanon to recognize the Armenian genocide. Notwithstanding Armenian-Syrian close ties and the large and organized Armenian community, the discussion of Armenian genocide recognition and its possibility has become apparent only in recent years<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> **Official visit of President Serzh Sargsyan to Syria**, 22.03.2010, <https://www.president.am/en/foreign-visits/item/2010/03/22/news-94/>

<sup>25</sup> **Ibid.**

<sup>26</sup> **Ghahriyan 2020: 386.**

In 2009, the President of Syria, Bashar al-Assad arrived in Armenia for the first time, but did not visit the Armenian genocide memorial, according to the state protocol of the visits of foreign officials to Armenia. That decision of the head of Syria was due to Syrian-Turkish relations which had been successfully developing in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The discussion of the topic of the Armenian genocide at state level started to be discussed openly only after the deterioration of Syrian-Turkish relations in 2011. In an interview given to AFP in 2014, the President of Syria compared the atrocities taking place in Syria with the annihilation of 1.5 million Armenians and Assyrians by the Ottoman government<sup>27</sup>. Several days later, the ambassador of Syria to the UN spoke about this question. In 2015, on the occasion of the centennial of the Armenian genocide, the Parliament of Syria paid a tribute to the victims of the genocide in its special session<sup>28</sup>.

In his message to the Speaker of the Armenian National Assembly, Galust Sahakyan, the Speaker of the Syrian Parliament, Muhammad Jihad al-Laham expressed the solidarity of the Syrian government and people with the fraternal Armenian people on the occasion of the 99th anniversary of the Armenian genocide, which “the Turkish government repeats in the north of Syria against the Armenians in Kessab and other Syrians”<sup>29</sup>. In 2015, on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Armenian genocide, Syria was represented at the level of the Speaker of the National Assembly, Muhammad Jihad al-Laham<sup>30</sup>.

Speaking on the 100th anniversary of the Armenian genocide, the President of Syria stressed that “100 years ago the Armenian people were

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<sup>27</sup> **The president of Syria compared the terrorist acts in the country with the Armenian genocide perpetrated by Turkey**, 21.01.2014, <https://armenpress.am/arm/amp/746970>.

<sup>28</sup> **Merzavor Arevk'um Hayots tsexspanutyán č'anačumə drakan dinamika e ardzanagrum, [The recognition of the Armenian genocide in the Middle East has a positive dynamics]**, 14.02.2020, <https://armenpress.am/arm/news/1004971/>.

<sup>29</sup> **HDA of the MFA of the RA**, case 149 list 20, p. 29

<sup>30</sup> **President meets with Speaker of Syrian People's Council Mohammad Jihad al-Laham**, 22.04.2015, <https://www.president.am/en/press-release/item/2015/04/22/President-Serzh-Sargsyan-meeting-with-Syrian-Parliament-speaker/>

subjected to genocide. Unfortunately, history repeats itself today. Today, the Syrian people are facing the suffering of the Armenian people<sup>31</sup>. In 2019, the Syrian parliament approved the teaching of the Armenian genocide topics in Syrian schools<sup>32</sup>.

The Parliament of Syria recognized the Armenian genocide on February 13, 2020. In response, the Parliament of Armenia welcomed the unequivocal decision of the Syrian parliament. In its resolution, the Parliament of Syria condemned the perpetration of the Armenian genocide by the Ottoman authorities at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The resolution also condemned any attempt at negation of the crime and the distortion of the truth and affirmed that the crime is one of the gravest and most horrible acts against humanity. The resolution expressed the sympathy of the People's Assembly towards the friendly Armenian nation and recognized that the Armenians, Syrians, Assyrians and other nations were systematically subjected to ethnic cleansing and massacres by the Ottoman Empire, and called on the world and international community to recognize the Armenian genocide, too<sup>33</sup>.

### ***The position of Armenia in the Syrian conflict***

Armenia's official stance towards the Syrian conflict is largely shaped by the presence of the Armenian community in Syria, the necessity to protect Armenian cultural heritage and the need to adopt a balanced position to successfully maneuver between the partner countries supporting Assad and renouncing his rule to reduce possible pressure from them.

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<sup>31</sup> Edward Nalbandyann aycelec Siria, [Edward Nalbandyan visited Syria], 27.05.2015, <https://www.mfa.am/hy/press-releases/2015/05/27/min-syr/5280>.

<sup>32</sup> Siriayi avag dprotsnerum Hayots tseğspanutyan teman arden partadir kdarna. Nora Arisyan [The subject of the Armenian genocide will become mandatory in the high schools of Syria, Nora Arisyan], 22.04.2019, <https://www.shantnews.am/news/view/350627.html>.

<sup>33</sup> 15 شباط 2020 مجلس الشعب يتبنى بالإجماع قراراً يدين ويقر جريمة الإبادة الجماعية المرتكبة بحق الأرمينيين في الدولة العثمانية  
**The People's Assembly unanimously adopts a resolution condemning and approving the crime of genocide committed against Armenians by the Ottoman Empire,**  
[https://www.parliament.gov.sy/arabic/index.php?node=554&nid=21625&First=0&Last=2459&CurrentPage=6&mid=&refBack=.](https://www.parliament.gov.sy/arabic/index.php?node=554&nid=21625&First=0&Last=2459&CurrentPage=6&mid=&refBack=)

Armenia's position was neutral in the UN<sup>34</sup>, including the resolutions strictly condemning the cases of violation of human rights by the Syrian authorities<sup>35</sup>. Maintaining their neutrality at the same time, the Armenian authorities continued to congratulate their colleagues on the occasion of official holidays and pay visits. Taking into consideration that, since the start of the conflict in Syria, Armenia has remained one of the few countries to send delegations to Damascus. They were often received personally by President Bashar al-Assad. In May 2015, the minister of foreign affairs, Edward Nalbandyan, arrived in Damascus<sup>36</sup>. This visit can be assessed as a return visit for the presence of the high level Syrian delegation at the events of the 100th anniversary of the Armenian genocide in 2015.

In 2013, the minister of foreign affairs of Armenia represented the position of the official Yerevan towards the Syrian conflict: “The Armenian government not only closely monitors the developments in Syria, but it has also taken appropriate steps at different levels. The efforts are primarily aimed at ensuring the security of the Syrian-Armenians.”<sup>37</sup> Speaking on the conflict resolution, the next minister highlighted: “The Republic of Armenia is sure that the Syrian crisis must be resolved through dialogue considering the interests of all groups living there”<sup>38</sup>.

In June 2014, Syria held presidential elections, which most countries in the world did not recognize. Armenia was one of the few countries that

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<sup>34</sup> **Armenia abstained from voting UN General Assembly Resolution on Syria**, 04.08.2012, <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/689490/armeniya-vozderzhalas-v-golosovanii-v-genassamblee-on.html>

<sup>35</sup> **General Assembly Adopts Resolution Strongly Condemning ‘Widespread and Systematic’ Human Rights Violations by Syrian Authorities**, 16.02.2012, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2012/ga11207.doc.htm>.

<sup>36</sup> **Edvard Nalbandyann aytselts Siria, [Edward Nalbandyan visited Syria]**, 27.05.2015, <https://www.mfa.am/hy/press-releases/2015/05/27/min-syr/5280>

<sup>37</sup> **Siriakan č'gnažami hartsum Hayastani dirk'orošumə či pokhvel, [Armenia's position on the Syrian crisis has not changed]**, 29.08.2013, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/25089872.html>.

<sup>38</sup> **Mnatsakanyanə nerkayatsrets Siriayi č'gnažami kargavorman hartsum HH dirk'orošumə, [Mnatsakanyan represented the position of Armenia and the settlement of the Syrian crisis]**, 04.03.2020, <https://artsakhpress.am/arm/news/122242/mnacakanyany-nerkayacrec-siriayi-tchgnazhami-kargavorman-harcum-hh-dirqoroshumy.html>.

recognized those elections. Armenia's President Serzh Sargsyan congratulated Bashar al-Assad on his victory in the elections<sup>39</sup>.

Armenia was involved in the Syrian developments from a humanitarian point of view. During the years of the conflict, Armenia provided economic and humanitarian assistance to Syria, which was primarily aimed at the Armenian community, which was in a difficult situation.

In 2019, Armenia sent a group of deminers to Syria in cooperation with Russia. To justify its decision to send a mission to Aleppo, the Armenian government referred to the humanitarian crisis in Syria and especially in Aleppo caused by the military operations, the UN resolutions, the written requests of the Syrian side, as well as the presence of a large Armenian community in Aleppo<sup>40</sup>. An 83-member group of Armenian specialists comprising humanitarian deminers, doctors and security personnel arrived in Aleppo, Syria on 8 February, to provide humanitarian aid to the Syrian people<sup>41</sup>. This issue was regularly discussed in previous years, but Armenia did not consider it preferable to send a mission. This issue also caused political complications for Armenia. On the one hand, Russia wanted to involve as many countries in Syria as possible for internationalization of its mission, and on the other hand, Western countries, particularly the United States, expressed its disapproval towards the intention of sending an Armenian mission to Syria<sup>42</sup>.

At this stage, the rapprochement between Armenia and Syria was facilitated by common interests in certain regional issues. This is primarily due

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<sup>39</sup> **President Serzh Sargsyan sent congratulatory message to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad**, 13.06.2014, <https://www.president.am/en/congratulatory/item/2014/06/13/President-Serzh-Sargsyan-congratulation-to-President-of-Syria/>

<sup>40</sup> **Humanitarian group of Armenian specialists arrives in Syria**, 08.02.2019, <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/963539.html>.

<sup>41</sup> **Armenian specialists arrive in Syria**, 08.02.2019, <https://mil.am/en/news/5921>.

<sup>42</sup> **AMN-n či pašpanum Hayastani ev Rusastani mijev hamagorc'aktsut'yunə Siriayum arak'elut'yan harc'ov**, [The United States does not support cooperation between Armenia and Russia on the mission in Syria], 13.02.2019, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/29767739.html>.

to the threat posed by Turkey to both countries. The next circumstance was the good neighborly relations between the two countries with Russia and Iran.

Despite the war in Syria, some efforts were made to develop economic relations between the two countries. During this period, an attempt was made to relaunch the Damascus-Yerevan flight. In 2017, the regular direct flight of the Syrian "Cham Wings" airline to Yerevan-Damascus was announced, which aimed to facilitate communication between the two countries, to be an additional impetus for the development of bilateral relations<sup>43</sup>. However, it failed to fulfill its goal.

Armenia-Syria trade turnover has increased sharply in 2014, which is due to the growth of exports from Armenia. In 2017 exports from Armenia to Syria exceeded \$ 50 million annually, and Syria's exports reached to about 2% of Armenia's total exports. The sharp increase is due to the export of tobacco products from Armenia<sup>44</sup>.

Armenia was also interested in participating in the reconstruction of Syria's economy and infrastructure. This has been stated several times during meetings between Armenian and Syrian officials<sup>45</sup>.

## Conclusion

The human factor - historical ties, human contacts have played a visible role in Armenian-Syrian relations, which is reflected in the speeches made during the official contacts between the two countries. That is the basis for political relations. Over the past 30 years, Armenia and Syria have tried to harmonize their interests and approaches on various issues, but regional factors and developments have had a serious impact on Armenia-Syria relations.

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<sup>43</sup> **Siriayi khorhrdarani naxagahə bardzr e gnahatum Hayastani het bardzr makardaki haraberut'yunnerə, [The Syrian parliament highly appreciates the high level relations with Armenia],** 21.06.2017, <https://www.aravot.am/2017/06/21/893178/>.

<sup>44</sup> **Official website of State Revenue Committee,** <https://petekamutner.am/Content.aspx?itn=csCIExportStatistics>

<sup>45</sup> **Delegation headed by Suren Karayan had several meetings in Syria,** 01.11.2017, <https://www.mineconomy.am/news/772;> **Armenia-Syria,** 11.04.2017, <https://armcci.am/?p=4807&lang=en>.

Notwithstanding the convergence of interests on a number of issues, the foreign policy priorities of the countries differed significantly. Armenia was building its security environment within the framework of bilateral and multilateral relations with Russia, through membership in European structures and closer relations with the United States. Syria, for its part, being under Western sanctions, was largely focused on deepening ties with regionally influential countries.

With limited resources, these two countries were not able to pursue an active policy in all directions, which left its mark on Armenian-Syrian relations. Although in various periods of the Armenian-Syrian relations the Syrian authorities conditioned the relations with Armenia with their relations with third countries, particularly Turkey, and the Armenian-Syrian relations did not develop to their full potential, nevertheless those relations have been at quite high level for the last 30 years<sup>46</sup>.

Armenia has provided political, economic and humanitarian assistance to Syria, especially since 2011 when the war began and has not ended yet. During the years of crisis, Syria-Armenia relations have developed mainly in the direction of humanitarian assistance. However, it should be emphasized that the Republic of Armenia was the only UN member state that never stopped the work of its diplomatic missions in Syria, despite the difficult situation.

In 1991-2021 the Armenian side paid 14 official and working visits in total and in the same period only 4 Syrian visits took place<sup>47</sup>. This difference can be explained inter alia by the existence of a vast Armenian community in Syria, but other realities also have their role, such as the historical - moral responsibility Armenians felt towards Syria.

The sequence of events in recent years has evidently demonstrated that both countries have common interests in light of Turkey's regional policy. The political instability and uncertainty in Syria and Turkey's direct involvement in Syria's affairs negatively impacted Armenia, too. During the Autumn war of

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<sup>46</sup> Compared to the dynamics of relations with other Arab countries.

<sup>47</sup> **Official website of the MFA of the RA, Bilateral Relations, Syria.**

2020 in Nagorno Karabakh, Turkey recruited thousands of mercenaries in the northern territories of Syria under its control and transferred them to the conflict zone. Therefore, the Armenian-Syrian agenda needs an upgrade to level up these relations and to counteract security threats. The recent developments may trigger the two countries to reevaluate their relations considering Turkey's expansive policy in its immediate neighborhood and its tough stance towards Armenia and Syria.

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## **ՀԱՅԱՍՏԱՆ-ՍԻՐԻԱ ՀԱՐԱԲԵՐՈՒԹՅՈՒՆՆԵՐԸ ՁԵՎԱՎՈՐՈՂ ԳՈՐԾՈՆՆԵՐԸ**

*Մուշեղ Ղահրիյան, Գրիգոր Վարդանյան*

**Բանալի բառեր՝** Հայաստան, Սիրիա, երկկողմ հարաբերություններ, շահեր, հայ համայնք, քաղաքականություն, տնտեսություն, առևտուր, Թուրքիա, Սիրիական պատերազմ:

Հոդվածում քննության են առնվում Հայաստանի և Սիրիայի միջպետական հարաբերությունները 1991 թվականից սկսած: Երկու երկրների

հարաբերություններին վերաբերող բազմաթիվ հարցեր եղել են հայ հետազոտողների հետաքրքրության շրջանակում: Հողվածում, հիմնվելով սկզբնաղբյուրների, մամուլի հրապարակումների և հարցազրույցների վրա, ներկայացվում են այն գործոնները, որոնք ձևավորում են հայ-սիրիական միջպետական հարաբերությունները: Հողվածում լուսաբանվում են երեք հիմնական գործոններ՝ հումանիտար, քաղաքական և տնտեսական: Հումանիտար գործոնը՝ պատմական իրադարձությունները, մարդկային կապերը, հայ համայնքը Սիրիայում, էական ազդեցություն է ունի Հայաստանի և Սիրիայի հարաբերությունների վրա:

Քաղաքական առումով երկու երկրները փորձում են համագործակցության եզրեր գտնել թե երկկողմ հարաբերություններում, թե տարածաշրջանային խնդիրներում: Արտաքին գործոնները հայ-սիրիական հարաբերությունների վրա մշտապես մեծ ազդեցություն են ունեցել:

Ժամանակագործեն երկու երկրների հարաբերությունները կարելի է բաժանել երեք փուլի՝

1. 1990-ական թթ., որը ներառում է երկու երկրների հարաբերությունների հաստատման, միմյանց ճանաչելու, համագործակցության եզրեր գտնելու շրջանը:

2. 2000-ականներին, հիմնականում պայմանավորված սիրիա-թուրքական հարաբերություններով, հայ-սիրիական հարաբերությունները որոշակիորեն սառում են, դադարում կամ նվազում է համագործակցությունը տարբեր ոլորտներում:

3. Երրորդ փուլը կարելի է անվանել հարաբերությունների վերագործարկման շրջան, որը սկսվեց 2009 թվականին երկու երկրների արտաքին գործերի նախարարների և նախագահների փոխայցելություններով և տնտեսական ու քաղաքական համագործակցությունը խթանելու փորձերով:

2011 թ. սկսված սիրիական հակամարտությունն իր ազդեցությունն ունեցավ թե հայ-սիրիական հարաբերությունների, թե հայ համայնքի վրա: Սիրիայի հետ հարաբերություններում Հայաստանը մանևրում էր համաշխարհային ուժային կենտրոնների միջև, որոնց մի մասը չի ճանաչում Բաշար ալ-Ասադի իշխանությունը Սիրիայում, իսկ մյուս մասը պաշտպա-

նում է Սիրիայի գործող իշխանությանը: Այս փուլում, պայմանավորված սիրիա-թուրքական հարաբերություններով, Սիրիան ավելի անկաշկանդ էր մի շարք հարցերում, այդ թվում՝ Հայոց ցեղասպանության ճանաչման գործում, որը տեղի ունեցավ 2020 թվականին: