

# Syrian-Armenian Relations: Historical Background and Current State

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**Abstract.** This article looks into some main aspects of Syrian-Armenian relations. The first section gives an overview of the history of the Syrian-Armenian relations focusing primarily on the period after 1991 when the independence of the Republic of Armenia was declared and official relations with the Syrian Arab Republic were established. In addition, the factors that have contributed to developing bilateral ties are studied. It is noted that the most important of those factors is the presence of Armenian community in Syria which has always served as a link helping maintain friendly relations between the two republics. The second part of the article deals with the Syrian-Armenian relations during the conflict in Syria as well as it studies the role of the Republic of Armenia in sending assistance to the people of the Syrian Arab Republic and in particular – to the Armenian community there. It is concluded that positive experience and background of bilateral ties between Armenia and Syria, absence of evident contradictions in their relations and high appreciation of Armenia's role in providing humanitarian assistance to the Syrian Arab Republic expressed by the Syrian government can serve as a basis for furthering and facilitating relations between the two states and peoples.

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**Keywords:** Syrian-Armenian relations, Republic of Armenia, Syrian Arab Republic, Armenian community of Syria, Syrian conflict

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## Introduction

Relations between Armenia and Syria have a long history, considering the centuries-old ties of the peoples of the two countries. The special (and symbolic) significance in the history of this relationship is that, following the 1915 genocide, tens of thousands of Armenians have found refuge on Syrian territory. The community became the basis for the development of Armenian–Syrian relations.

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Republic of Armenia and the Syrian Arab Republic, both sides have always emphasized the friendly nature of their relations and noted the need to develop bilateral cooperation. However, both Syria for Armenia and Armenia for Syria have never been a key political or economic partner.

In the context of the Syrian conflict, Armenia has actively helped Syria, which was highly appreciated by the Syrian state and gave rise to predictions about the possible strengthening of Armenian–Syrian ties.

The objectives of this article are to define the specifics of relations between Armenia and Syria and to identify factors that could contribute to their further development and deepening.

## Materials and Methods

The source base of the research is the material from interviews conducted by the author during field studies in Yerevan (March 2019, July 2022), Damascus and Aleppo (February 2022).

Due to the lack of Russian-language works on most aspects of the problem under consideration, the author refers to the works of Armenian researchers in Armenian, Arabic and English (generally also very small)

## Results

### From the history of Armenian–Syrian relations

The Armenian–Syrian relations are not treated in this article as exclusively inter-State, since they are based on a rich and long history of relations between the two peoples. Many researchers believe that the historical experience of the links between Armenia and Syria is one of the most important factors determining the nature of the relationship between the two states already at the present stage [1; 7].

Special attention is always given to the role of the Syrian people in saving the Armenians<sup>1</sup>, who were in Syria after the genocide of 1915 [6]. The establishment of an Armenian community in that country in the following years was key to establishing and maintaining Armenian–Syrian contacts.

During the Soviet period, the history of Armenia gradually established links between Soviet Armenia and Armenian communities in different countries of the world, including Syria.

Since about the middle of the 40's XX the leadership of the Armenian SSR has started to create institutional framework for establishing contacts with compatriots from the diaspora<sup>2</sup>. In 1944, the Armenian Society of Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries was established and in 1962 it opened a department for relations with Armenian communities. Later, in 1964, the Committee on Cultural Relations with the Diaspora Armenians was established, one of whose main tasks was to establish and develop contacts with the communities of the Armenian diaspora [3:92–104].

There were, of course, difficulties along the way, such as the conflict between the three main Armenian parties in the diaspora over their ties with Soviet Armenia. While the Social Democratic Party «Gnchak» and the Liberal Democratic Party «Ramkwar–Azatakan» were flexible, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation «Dashnakzut» was uneasy for ideological reasons.

Both the Armenian Society's cultural relations with foreign countries and the Committee on Cultural Relations with the Diaspora Armenians were concerned exclusively with establishing contacts with «progressive forces» in the diaspora (these included the Communist Parties and the Armenian national parties «Ramkwar–Azatakan» and «Gnchak») [3:93–94].

The efforts of the Committee on Cultural Relations with the Diaspora Armenians have included bilateral visits, meetings with representatives of Armenian community structures in different countries, financial assistance to communities, The delivery of Armenian literature to communities and distribution of Soviet magazines and newspapers, retraining of teachers from community educational organizations in the Armenian SSR [3:108–117].

The Armenian community in Syria was among those communities of the diaspora that maintained ties with Soviet Armenia, and many Armenian community structures in Syria actively participated in activities and programmes conducted by the Committee on Cultural Relations. At the same time, the Syrian Armenians, who have successfully integrated into Syria's social, economic and political life, have enjoyed a sympathetic attitude from the Syrian leadership. This probably contributed to the fact that during his visit to the USSR in 1979, Syrian President Hafez Assad visited the Armenian SSR [1:91]. The Russian Federation is a well-known example of this.

Thus, the Syrian Armenian community became a bridge that helped to lay the foundations for establishing a dialogue between the Republic of Armenia and the Syrian Arab Republic.

1 According to some data, they numbered about 225 thousand. people [9:167].  
2 No contacts have been maintained before for political and ideological reasons.

## The establishment of diplomatic relations

The beginning of the establishment of official bilateral relations between the Republic of Armenia and the Syrian Arab Republic was established by the agreement «On the establishment of relations between the Republic of Armenia and the Syrian Arab Republic» March 1992. The same year, the Embassy of the Republic of Armenia in Damascus was opened<sup>3</sup>. Five years later, in 1997, the Embassy of the Syrian Arab Republic was opened in Yerevan<sup>4</sup>.

The diplomatic representation of Armenia in Syria is not limited to the embassy in the Syrian capital: there are an Armenian consulate general in Aleppo (since 1993) and an honorary consulate in Deir ez-Zor (since 2010). The opening of the Armenian Consulate General in Aleppo was due to the large number of Armenian population (according to data from the beginning of 2000, about 50,000 people [4:518]). As for Deir ez-Zor, this city has an important historical and symbolic significance for the Armenians of Syria, since it is directly linked to the events of the 1915 genocide.

The start of the Armenian De-Assembly in Syria was made possible largely by the efforts of the local Armenian community. Community representatives provided material support for the opening of the embassy in Damascus and facilitated contacts between the members of the mission and local authorities and society<sup>5</sup>.

The establishment of a deponence between the Republic of Armenia and the Syrian Arab Republic was accompanied by numerous high-level bilateral visits, as well as preparation of a broad legal and contractual framework. Thus, the parties signed agreements on cooperation in various fields (the most important of them – «On economic cooperation between the Republic of Armenia and the Syrian Arab Republic» (1992), «On economic and technical cooperation between the Ministry of Industry of the Republic of Armenia and the Ministry of Industry of the Syrian Arab Republic» (1992), «On military and technical cooperation between the Government of the Republic of Armenia and the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic» (2001))<sup>6</sup>, as well as memoranda of understanding and cooperation between the two countries' line ministries and other entities.

In the legislative bodies of two republics, inter-parliamentary friendship committees were formed: in the National Assembly of Armenia – parliamentary group «Armenia–Syria» friendship, in the People's Council of Syria – Syrian-Armenian Friendship Committee. Their activities allow a wide range of issues relating to the development of relations between States to be included in the discussion.

Since 2009, the Syrian-Armenian Business Council has been in operation to promote trade and economic ties between the countries.

3 Until 2007, he was headed by the Interim Chargé d'affaires, after the upgrading of the status of the Armenian Department in 2007. – Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador.

4 Until 2017, the office was headed by a temporary representative in affairs, after which – the level of representation was increased.

5 Petrosyan A.G. Author's interview archive (Yerevan, 2019; Damascus, Aleppo, 2022).

6 Bilateral relations (Syria). Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia. Available from: <https://www.mfa.am/ru/bilateral-relations/sy>.

But, despite the existence of a broad framework for bilateral cooperation, underpinned by both historical ties between the two peoples and established formal contacts since 1992, during the 1990s and then into the 2000s it was not high-level.

The relatively low level of trade and economic cooperation between the two countries (despite the potential) researchers explain the following reasons: logistical obstacles (Turkish blockade of the Republic of Armenia and lack of direct land routes between Armenia and Syria); financial and economic difficulties in both countries, limiting mutual investment; bureaucratic complications; non-competitiveness of prices; lack of mutual interest [2:125, 129; 5:31, 35].

In the political sphere, relations at the official level between Syria and Armenia, although they developed initially relatively actively, but in the early 2000s. Became characterized by some «cooling». This was due to the Syrian-Turkish rapprochement and, as a consequence, the Syrian leadership's unwillingness to jeopardize these relations [2:127–129]. This did not mean a complete cessation of official Armenian–Syrian contacts; it was generally only a reduction in their intensity and level.

### Bilateral relations during the Syrian conflict

In the context of the conflict in Syria, Armenian–Syrian relations have entered a new phase of development.

With the beginning of the armed action, the Republic of Armenia could not remain on the sidelines. Armenia's attention was due to: the presence of an Armenian community in Syria, forced migration of a large number of Syrian Armenians to Armenia, geographical proximity of Armenia to the Middle East region.

During the years of conflict in Syria, the Armenian authorities continued to maintain official contacts with the Syrian government. Armenian diplomatic missions in Syria did not cease operating under the conditions of war. The Consulate General of the Republic of Armenia in Aleppo was the only one that did not close during the entire conflict, despite the difficult situation in Aleppo and serious security threats during the years of active military operations<sup>7</sup>.

The Armenian missions, along with their main functions (one of the key ones was the issuance of passports to Syrian Armenians who decided to obtain Armenian citizenship), served as a coordination function between various structures within the Armenian community in Syria, between Armenian communities in different Syrian cities, and between the Armenian community in Syria and Armenian communities in other states<sup>8</sup>.

Thanks to the activities of the Embassy and Consulate-General of the Republic of Armenia in the Syrian Arab Republic and their direct links with local Armenian organizations and associations, up-to-date information was promptly transmitted

<sup>7</sup> Interview with the ambassador: Tigran Gevorgian. Available from: <https://news.am/rus/news/285710.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Petrosyan A.G. Author's interview archive (Yerevan, 2019; Damascus, Aleppo, 2022).

to the state structures in the Republic of Armenia on necessary assistance, its distribution<sup>9</sup>.

In the initial stages of the conflict, the Government of the Republic of Armenia did not have an active policy in Syria, but over time it began to take concrete steps.

Since October 2016, Russian technical and logistical assistance has been provided to Syria from Armenia for the humanitarian aid of the Syrian people<sup>10</sup>.

Armenian authorities also decided to send a humanitarian mission to Aleppo in early 2019<sup>11</sup>. Its main activity is demining and medical assistance to the local population. The mission members organize special seminars to inform people about security and provide assistance during the post-war period of adaptation. They also deliver and distribute humanitarian supplies and provide social assistance to the population.

Along with the mission to Aleppo, there is an Armenian humanitarian presence in the Damascus suburb of Darayya. Armenian specialists within the framework of the UN Mine Action Service (UNMAS) have been working here since December 2021. They are demining agricultural land and civilian sites. The presence of Armenian experts on this mission is positively perceived by the Syrian authorities, who for their part have insisted that demining work be carried out by experts from Armenia<sup>12</sup>.

Of course, the presence of the Armenian community was crucial for sending humanitarian aid and humanitarian missions to Syria for the Republic of Armenia. However, as already mentioned, the actions of the Republic of Armenia on the Syrian side were not dictated by this factor alone.

The purpose of the Armenian mission in Aleppo is to assist the entire Syrian people, not exclusively the Armenian community in Syria, as has been repeatedly stressed by the Armenian side. This was also mentioned when sending humanitarian aid, which was sent with the mark «Fraternal Syrian people with warm wishes of peace from Armenia»<sup>13</sup>. This position was certainly well received by the Syrian side and contributed to the Armenian–Syrian rapprochement.

That was the background to an event occurred that also contributed greatly to the strengthening of Armenian–Syrian relations. The unanimous adoption in February 2020 by the People's Council of the Syrian Arab Republic of a resolution recognizing and condemning the genocide of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire<sup>14</sup>.

According to some researchers, the decision was influenced by political context, namely – another intensification of Turkish-Syrian relations against the background of the

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Armenia, Available from: <https://www.mfa.am/en/interviews-articles-and-comments/2016/09/30/stat-syria/6537>.

<sup>11</sup> The mission is based on an agreement with the Russian Federation and carried out with technical assistance from the Russian side. Armenian humanitarian mission in Syria. Available from: <https://ru.armeniasputnik.am/gumanitarnaya-missiya-armenii-v-sirii/>.

<sup>12</sup> Petrosyan A.G. Author's interview archive (Yerevan, 2019; Damascus, Aleppo, 2022).

<sup>13</sup> Humanitarian aid from Armenia arrived at the Khmeimim airbase in Syria. Available from: <https://newsarmenia.am/news/armenia/gumanitarnaya-pomoshch-iz-armenii-pribyla-na-aviabazu-khmeimim-v-sirii/>.

<sup>14</sup> Syria People's Assembly Resolution. Available from: [https://www.armenian-genocide.org/Affirmation.790/current\\_category.7/affirmation\\_detail.html](https://www.armenian-genocide.org/Affirmation.790/current_category.7/affirmation_detail.html).

situation in Idlib<sup>15</sup>. But the adoption by the Syrian parliament of a resolution condemning the Armenian genocide cannot be seen as a purely political phenomenon, especially since the serious deterioration in relations between Syria and Turkey has come much earlier. The resolution was made possible by the active work of the Syrian-Armenian Friendship Committee and the activities of Armenian structures in Syria aimed at forming public opinion on the problem of recognition of genocide<sup>16</sup>.

Finally, another factor that could promote the development of Armenian-Syrian cooperation would be a more active participation of the Armenian side in the reconstruction of Syria, for example through investments by Armenian entrepreneurs in certain sectors of the economy (especially energy and real estate). These issues were discussed at meetings of representatives of Armenian business with the Syrian leadership<sup>17</sup>. But there is still no significant progress in this direction due to objective reasons related to the economic and political situation in both states.

But it is noteworthy that the President of the Syrian Arab Republic during a meeting with the delegation of the Republic of Armenia in late 2018 stated that Armenia's position in the conflict and its support allow it to be classified as a state, Whose participation in Syria's post-conflict reconstruction will be the most preferred<sup>18</sup>.

Armenian researchers also pointed out that the humanitarian presence of Armenia in Syria has created advantages for Armenia during the period of post-conflict reconstruction of Syria (in the field of health, construction and so on) [8:130].

## Conclusion

Armenian-Syrian relations have always been characterized by the traditional friendly ties between the two countries and peoples; contacts between them go back centuries.

In different periods of history, these relationships had different «fullness». During the Soviet period, Armenia's history was concerned only with cultural ties of the Armenian SSR and predominantly with the Armenian community in Syria (although this created a basis for the development of Armenian-Syrian relations). Following the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Republic of Armenia and the Syrian Arab Republic, a high level of official contacts has emerged and a desire to establish strong bilateral cooperation in various fields. During the 2000s. The intensity of these contacts has slightly decreased

<sup>15</sup> Syria's recognition of the Armenian genocide was a response to Turkey's actions in Idlib. Available from: <https://am.sputniknews.ru/20200213/Priznanie-Siriyey-Genotsida-armyan-stalo-otvetom-na-deystviya-Turtsii-v-Idlibe-22043425.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Siriayi Khorhrdarani Hauyots tseghaspanutyan chanachman banadzev paymanavorvats e voch miayn artaqin, ayl naev nerqin gortsonov. A. Pashayan. Available from: <https://www.tert.am/am/news/2020/02/17/pashayan/3212941> Petrosyan A.G. Author's interview archive (Yerevan, 2019; Damascus, Aleppo, 2022).

<sup>17</sup> Assad voghjunel e Hayastani Janqer Hetpaterazmakan Siriayi Verakangkanm Gortsum. Available from: [https://www.azatutyun.am/a/29663016.html?fbclid=IwAR285\\_C0gf9R5a\\_i1j2EY2l3I9FheYixRcDx5R3CSzYKVZOSEFDUblLFII](https://www.azatutyun.am/a/29663016.html?fbclid=IwAR285_C0gf9R5a_i1j2EY2l3I9FheYixRcDx5R3CSzYKVZOSEFDUblLFII).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

against the background of the Turkish-Syrian rapprochement, but this has not had serious negative consequences.

It was given new impetus during the Syrian conflict, when Armenia's actions in providing humanitarian assistance to Syria created preconditions for deepening political cooperation and developing economic relations between the two countries.

Overall, given the positive mood and signals from both sides, Armenian-Syrian relations today have a wide perspective. The basis will be a traditionally positive perception of each other, the presence of the Armenian community in Syria and possibly the participation of Armenia in the processes of reconstruction of Syria.

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