Main features of Armenia's Syrian policy

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A N A L Y S I S
E X C L U S I V E

Syria, an important country in the Middle East, has just experienced first-hand the consequences of shifting tides in the world order and subsequently, the regional order. However, for the sake of doing justice, the Syrian conflict has itself significantly contributed to the geopolitical shifts of the late 2010s, intensifying both global and regional competition.

First of all, there would not have been a change of power in Syria if the process of reshaping the world order hadn't entered an active stage following the Ukraine war and the significant waning of Russia's influence. Plus, the victory of anti-government forces in Syria wouldn't have occurred if Israel, taking advantage of the reshaping of the world order throughout 2022 and especially from October 2023, hadn't consistently worked to improve its security by significantly reducing Iran's influence in the region through military operations in Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria. Finally, the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad's regime wouldn't have occurred without Turkey's revisionist ambitions amid the shifting world order, supported by several key Western and regional players.

Moreover, it is important to note that the factors mentioned above also had a negative impact on the micro-region, including the South Caucasus, Armenia, and the Armenian people. Following the start of the Ukrainian war, Azerbaijan, driven by revisionist ambitions, fully captured and depopulated the historically Armenian Nagorno-Karabakh with comprehensive support from Turkey. Subsequently, it forced Russia, which stopped the Armenian-Azerbaijani war in 2020 and had maintained a military presence in the region as part of a peacekeeping mission under the trilateral agreement, out of the region.

The main factors that play a key role in shaping the policy of the Republic of Armenia regarding Syria are as follows. First and foremost, it should be emphasized that Armenia has unique interests in this globally unmatched significant Middle Eastern country. Syria is a key country for Armenia in multiple dimensions, both for Armnia's relations with the Middle East and Arab-Muslim countries, but most importantly for the protection of its diaspora, particularly the Syrian-Armenian community. It is of strategic importance for Armenia and the Armenian people to preserve their spiritual, historical, and cultural heritage.

The Armenian community in Syria is renowned for its significant spiritual and cultural contributions. Before the war, they were estimated at 60,000 to 80,000, residing in various parts of Syria, particularly in the north, including Aleppo, Kessab, Latakia, Damascus, Kurdish Qamishli, Homs, Deir ez-Zor, and other areas. Generally, as previously mentioned, the safe and sustained presence of the Syrian-Armenian community is a matter of strategic importance not only for the Republic of Armenia but also for the entire Armenian nation.

This colony, which is the closest Armenian diaspora to the historical homeland, was established between 1915 and 1923 as a result of the Armenian Genocide during World War I. Aleppo was even referred to as the "mother colony" among diaspora Armenians due to its national, spiritual, and scientific-educational significance. Therefore, maintaining such strategic importance as much as possible has been a primary concern for Armenia throughout the Syrian conflict and remains so even today, especially considering the multifaced involvement of the Turks in the conflict and, in the current stage, its strengthened influence.

Therefore, given the context mentioned above, the most logical and effective approach for Armenia, whose influence on the Middle Eastern processes is naturally limited, was to establish relations with forces controlling the Armenian-inhabited regions and, through them, to protect the security of the Syrian-Armenian community and its heritage as much as possible.

During the Syrian conflict, which has moved into an active military phase since 2012, most Armenian-inhabited regions were under the control of the Syrian government. Further-
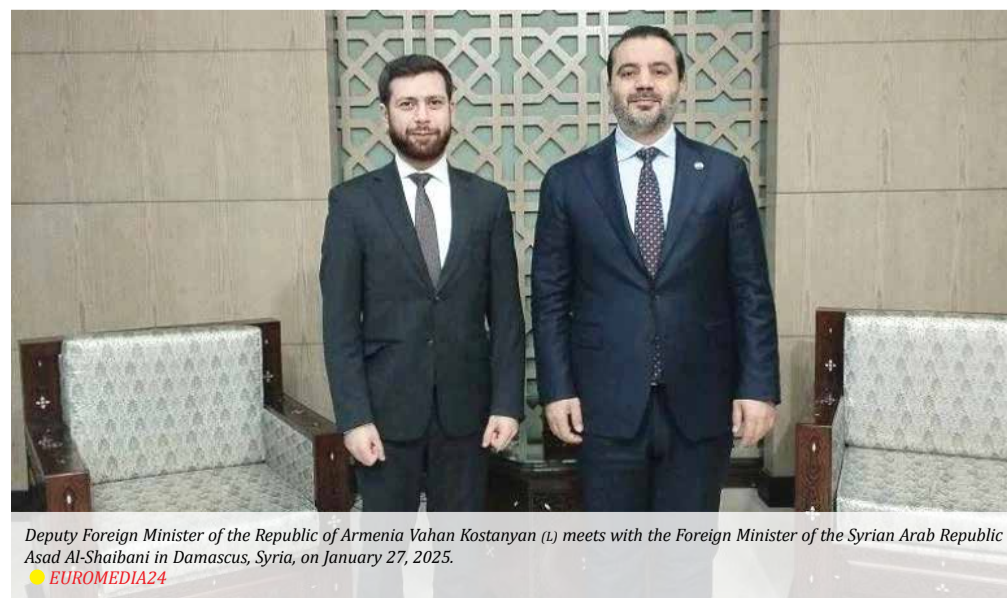
more, the Syrian-Armenians who fled regions controlled by various anti-government forces were mainly resettled in areas under the influence of the Bashar al-Assad regime. One of the key reasons for this is that within the geopolitical context of the Syrian conflict. Throughout its existence, on the one hand, the Syrian-Armenian community has always demonstrated pro-state behavior. On the other hand, especially during the rule of the al-Assad family, the community was afforded opportunities to preserve its broad spiritual, cultural, and national identity. That is why several important developments occurred during the active stages of the conflict. For example, the Armenian districts of Aleppo largely remained under the control of al-Assad's forces, and the Consulate General of Armenia in Aleppo never stopped its activities throughout the conflict. Furthermore, the completely Armenian-populated settlement of Kesab, which was deliberately captured and looted by pro-Turkish militants in March 2014, was liberated within three months, ensuring the safe return of its Armenian residents. Moreover, the Saint Martyrs' Church in Deir ez-Zor, a site of profound significance to Armenians, was restored by the Syrian government after the 2014 explosion by the terrorists, following the establishment of the cease-fire. In addition, on February 13, 2020, the People's Assembly of Syria unanimously adopted a resolution officially recogniz-

ing and condemning the Armenian Genocide, thus becoming the first Muslim country in that regard — while Lebanon also recognized the Armenian Genocide in 1997, it is not considered a fully Muslim country. Another important factor in Armenia's policy toward Syria was the warm and significant relations with the former regime. This environment emerged due to a number of objective circumstances. First, the strategic ties with Syria, established during the USSR period, were maintained inertially in the post-Soviet period, including with the newly independent Republic of Armenia. Another important factor, as previously mentioned, was the presence of an influential Syrian-Armenian community, which served as a unique

bridge for the development of relations between newly independent Armenia and the outside world, particularly with Syria. Additionally, a noteworthy thematic fact is that Levon Ter-Petrosyan, the first president of the Republic of Armenia, was born in Aleppo.

Another key element shaping close bilateral relations from the late 1990s and through the conflict was the complex relationship between Syria and Turkey, and Syria's strategic cooperation with Russia and Iran. Notably, a similar framework of relations exists between Armenia and these regional powers. And of course, as a key outcome of the aforementioned factors, there is bilateral, mutually beneficial cooperation in international and especially religious organizations. The latter was

crucial for Yerevan, especially given the targeted policies of Baku and Ankara in the Islamic and Arab world, presenting Armenia as an aggressor, an occupying country, and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as a religious conflict.

Under the influence of the factors mentioned above, Armenia maintained relations with Bashar al-Assad's regime during the active stage of the Syrian conflict. This included even a number of high-ranking visits, such as those by members of the Armenian Parliament in March 2014, and then-foreign minister Eduard Nalbandyan in May 2015. Moreover, following the establishment of a cease-fire through Russia-Iran-Turkey cooperation under the Astana format, bilateral contacts intensified not

Syrian Armenians in the northeastern Syrian city of Qamishli rally to express support for Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in October 2020.
● *DELIL SOULEIMAN/AFP*

Deputy Foreign Minister of the Republic of Armenia Vahan Kostanyan (L) meets with the Foreign Minister of the Syrian Arab Republic Asad Al-Shaibani in Damascus, Syria, on January 27, 2025.
● *EUROMEDIA24*

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