

AZERBAIJAN-SYRIA RELATIONS

SHAPING THE FLUCTUATIONS AND TURNING POINTS (1992-2025)

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Abstract

This article examines the evolution of Azerbaijani-Syrian relations across three distinct phases: the post-Soviet period, the era of Bashar al-Assad's rule, and the emerging dynamics in post-Assad Syria. It offers a comprehensive analysis of the bilateral relationship, focusing on its structural challenges, developmental patterns, and strategic prospects. The study argues that the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011 and the subsequent deterioration in Turkish-Syrian relations indirectly shaped Syria's cautious posture toward Azerbaijan, given Baku's close strategic alignment with Ankara. Despite a prolonged period of stagnation spanning over a decade, no overt diplomatic rifts developed between Baku and Damascus. The recent installation of a pro-Turkish Islamist government in Syria in December 2024, combined with the retreat of Iranian and Russian influence, has opened new strategic avenues for Azerbaijan to expand its regional presence. Supported by Ankara, Baku sought to advance cooperation with Syria through multilateral frameworks, with particular emphasis on the energy sector. Furthermore, the article explores Azerbaijan's emerging role as a mediator between Turkey and Israel, Syria and Israel, following al-Assad's departure, suggesting that this shift may signal Baku's broader ambitions to position itself as a balancing actor in the Middle East. However, these ambitions are not always crowned with success. While these developments reflect Azerbaijan's aspiration to become an independent regional player, the analysis underscores that this role, particularly in the Syrian context, remains heavily contingent on continued Turkish support. The article also addresses the declining influence of the Armenian community in Syria and examines how Azerbaijan's diplomatic engagement with Damascus may serve to undermine Armenia's regional standing. Overall, the study provides a nuanced analysis of a previously understudied bilateral relationship, contextualizing it within the evolving dynamics of the conflict-affected Middle East.

Keywords:

Azerbaijan; Syria; Turkey; regional geopolitics; political shifts; conflict; energy diplomacy

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Introduction

This article aims to analyze the evolution of Azerbaijani-Syrian relations and the political motivations driving Azerbaijan's engagement with Syria in the aftermath of the fall of the Bashar al-Assad regime in late 2024. Since gaining independence, Azerbaijan has elevated the Middle East within its foreign policy priorities, underscoring both the region's Islamic significance and its political relevance. Besides the pursuit of bilateral engagement, Baku has sought to mobilize support from the Islamic world in advancing its position on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict [Pashayan, Navasardyan 2024]¹. Historical ties between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Syrian Arab Republic date back to the Soviet period, when personal relations existed between Syrian leader Hafez al-Assad and Heydar Aliyev. Both figures emerged from highly centralized, security-dominated political systems and later presided over the transfer of power to their sons². These structural and leadership parallels could contribute to an initial political rapprochement, foster a degree of mutual understanding rooted in shared governance experiences. However, bilateral relations ultimately failed to acquire strategic substance, whereas relations with the Gulf countries developed gradually and in a more comprehensive manner³. Despite Bashar al-Assad's visit to Baku in 2009 and a 2010 gas agreement, bilateral relations failed to develop meaningfully and remained largely dormant throughout al-Assad's rule. Between 2012 and 2024, Azerbaijan and Syria did not sustain significant diplomatic or institutional engagement. The post-Assad environment, however, has transformed Syria into a focal point of regional competition. Within this evolving landscape, Azerbaijan's engagement in Syria has acquired a strategic dimension, with Turkey

actively encouraging Baku's involvement amid regional rivalry and the anticipated decline of Iranian and Russian influence. One of the objectives of this study is to analyze Azerbaijan's motivations for transcending geographic constraints to deepen its engagement in the Middle East while contributing to a more balanced regional posture among competing actors. Such engagement enables Baku to enhance its regional influence, particularly through energy diplomacy, infrastructure initiatives, and diversified foreign partnerships. Moreover, Azerbaijan's diplomatic involvement in Syria, including potential mediation efforts involving Turkey and Israel [Mehdizade 2023: 144–145], Syria and Israel, reflects its aspiration to increase international visibility and status.

This study also examines the pivotal role of Turkey in shaping Azerbaijani-Syrian relations. The strategic partnership between Turkey and Azerbaijan, reinforced by the “one nation, two states” discourse and Neo-Ottoman political frameworks [Gasanova 2022:44–45], has aligned the foreign policy orientations of the two countries. The Baku-Ankara alignment has shaped regional perceptions and reinforced Azerbaijan's strategic positioning, particularly as its close cooperation with Turkey has contributed to Damascus's cautious and reserved approach toward Baku. Beyond the Turkish factor, Baku's tacit decision to suspend relations with Damascus was not incidental, but represented a strategic adjustment to the evolving regional dynamics, including the negative regional perception of the al-Assad regime and the deepening of strategic ties between Tehran and Damascus. Nevertheless, following the al-Assad regime's collapse, Azerbaijan has emerged as a proactive actor, coordinating closely with Turkey on stability, humanitarian, and reconstruction initiatives, while seeking to

¹ *Ismailzade F.* Azerbaijan's foreign policy priorities and the role of the Middle East // Middle East Institute. 2020. URL: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/azerbaijans-foreign-policy-priorities-and-role-middle-east> (accessed: 30.01.2026).

² *Ahmadzade R.* Similarities between Aliyev and Al-Assad regimes // Times of Israel. 13.06.2019. URL: <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/similarities-between-aliyev-and-al-assad-regimes/> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

³ *Alrmizan M.* Azerbaijan and Saudi Arabia: Bilateral Opportunities in a changing Middle East. King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies. Special Report. 2019. URL: <https://kfcris.com/pdf/91ba14ab13aea57468aee2d0cd58c0bd5d89e0ee3e6cf.pdf> (accessed 31.01.2026). P. 4–14.

project influence and establish itself as a credible mediator.

The study addresses a notable gap in the literature, as scholarly research on Azerbaijani-Syrian relations remains limited. To overcome this, the article draws on a diverse range of sources, including international media, official statements, resolutions from international organizations, and primary data collected through interviews with Armenian diplomats who served in Syria between 2001 and 2024.

Analytical framework

Before turning to the theoretical frameworks of International Relations, it is worth noting that Azerbaijani-Syrian relations provide a particularly instructive case study. Situated at the intersection of regional rivalries, transnational alignments, and evolving geopolitical dynamics, Azerbaijan's engagement with Syria illustrates how a small but strategically positioned state navigates complex regional environments, balances competing external influences, and advances its objectives beyond immediate national borders. This case offers a valuable empirical lens for examining and refining broader theories of interstate behavior, strategic alignment, and foreign policy decision-making.

From a neorealist perspective, Azerbaijan-Syria relations prior to 2012 can be characterized as security-peripheral. Syria did not represent either an immediate threat or a source of strategic value for Azerbaijan, nor did it affect Baku's core security environment. There was no direct security interdependence, no significant impact on the regional balance of power, and no incentive for alliance formation or counter-balancing behavior – conditions under which states typically deprioritize engagement [Walt 1987: 17–49; Mearsheimer 2001: 29–54]. Consequently, Azerbaijan pursued a strategy of low-cost engagement, maintaining a diplomatic presence without substantive political investment. The closure of Azerbaijan's embassy in Damascus in 2012 can be interpreted as a rational reactive decision, taken when the costs of maintaining diplomatic representation exceeded its strategic benefits, consistent with neorealist cost-benefit logic [Waltz 1979: 88–101; Walt 1987: 147–180].

From a liberal institutionalist perspective, the limited development of Azerbaijan-Syria relations is explained by the absence of functional interdependence. Bilateral trade remained negligible, energy links were non-existent, and institutionalized cooperation was negligible. In the absence of mutual material interests, institutional frameworks failed to emerge, rendering diplomatic engagement largely symbolic, as predicted by theories of complex interdependence [Keohane and Nye 2012: 7–32]. Within this framework, the closure of the embassy in 2012 represents institutional disengagement, occurring when no material incentives exist to sustain cooperation under conditions of crisis [Keohane 1984: 67–92; Keohane, Nye 2012: 209–233].

From a constructivist perspective, Azerbaijan-Syria relations prior to 2012 were characterized by normative distance and identity mismatch. Azerbaijan positioned itself as a secular, post-Soviet, pragmatically oriented state, whereas Syria was governed by an authoritarian Ba'athist regime. There was no shared narrative, historical memory, or compatible role conception capable of fostering closer political engagement, reflecting the constructivist emphasis on the role of identity, norms, and social meaning in shaping state behavior [Wendt 1999: 1–20; Katzenstein 1996: 1–32]. With the onset of the Syrian crisis in 2011–2012, Azerbaijan rapidly adopted a strategy of normative distancing, closing its embassy and avoiding association with a regime perceived as ideologically and normatively incompatible [Wendt 1999: 224–260].

Following the establishment of an Islamist regime in Syria, Azerbaijan's intensified engagement can be understood as a form of multi-vector adaptive behavior by a small-to-middle power navigating a shifting regional order, seeking to manage systemic uncertainty through flexible alignment strategies rather than rigid alliances [Thorhallsson 2019: 15–35]. Azerbaijan-Syria relations are not structured according to the logic of a classical bilateral strategic alliance; instead, they reflect a model of instrumental and contingent cooperation, typical of adaptive state behavior in volatile regional environments.

Since 2024, from a neorealist perspective, Azerbaijan's policy in Syria can be understood as a strategy of balancing and security calculation under conditions of regional uncertainty [Walt 1987:17–49; Mearsheimer 2001: 29–54]. Azerbaijan attempts to reduce strategic uncertainty by leveraging its close alliance with Turkey and positioning itself in Syria as an additional legitimizing element of Turkish regional influence [Cooper et al. 1993: 3–28]. Within this framework, Syria functions as an indirect security platform where Azerbaijan seeks, at a minimum, not to contradict the vital interests of Iran and Russia, while simultaneously manoeuvring vis-à-vis the Islamist regime. In this context, Azerbaijan's behaviour appears to be consistent with a bandwagoning logic, aligning itself with the strategy of the most influential regional actor – in this case, Turkey – rather than pursuing autonomous balancing [Walt 1987: 147–180].

From the perspective of liberal institutionalism, Azerbaijan's engagement is driven by pragmatic economic interests, particularly in the energy sector. States embedded in complex interdependence often employ economic tools to advance political objectives without overt coercion [Keohane, Nye 2012]. Azerbaijan seeks to capitalize on its energy expertise by presenting itself as a potential actor in Syria's reconstruction, infrastructure development, and energy mediation, while linking Syria to Turkish energy and logistical hubs. This approach reflects a form of soft power exercised through economics, where energy functions as an instrument of political influence rather than an end in itself [Blackwill, Harris 2016: 33–63].

From a constructivist standpoint, Azerbaijan's involvement in Syria also contains an identity-based dimension. State behavior is shaped not only by material interests but also by socially constructed identities and role conceptions [Wendt 1999: 1–20]. Azerbaijan seeks to portray itself as a Muslim yet secular state capable of cooperating with an Islamist regime

without ideological contradiction. This framing allows Baku to strengthen its standing within the broader Islamic world, particularly through mediation, by projecting an identity compatible with both secular governance and Islamic solidarity [Katzenstein 1996: 1–32; Wendt 1999: 224–260].

Finally, Azerbaijan's mediation ambitions can be interpreted as a form of status-seeking behavior in international relations. States with limited material capabilities often pursue diplomatic visibility and mediation roles to enhance their international standing and recognition [Paul et al. 2014: 1–27]. By positioning itself as a constructive and cooperative actor, Azerbaijan seeks to increase its international profile while consolidating its role within Turkey's regional agenda. Such diplomatic activism is characteristic of small and medium states attempting to compensate for material constraints through normative and diplomatic engagement [Paul et al. 2014: 164–190; Neumann 2011: 39–65].

Before the Storm: Azerbaijan-Syria Relations in the Pre-Arab Spring Period

Azerbaijan's diplomatic ties with the Syrian Arab Republic trace their origins to the Soviet period, marked by collaboration between Syrian President Hafez al-Assad (1971–2000) and Heydar Aliyev (1993–2003), who served as First Secretary of the Communist Party of Soviet Azerbaijan (1969–1982). Syria and Azerbaijan have been politically estranged since the Soviet era, although Hafez al-Assad was personally acquainted with Heydar Aliyev. In 1972, Heydar Aliyev arrived in Aleppo to participate in a cultural event, during which he visited the grave of the eminent Arab poet, Imad ad-Din Nasimi, widely regarded as one of Azerbaijan's greatest poets⁴. Years later, in 1984, Heydar Aliyev was entrusted with a classified mandate by the Politburo of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union as part of Moscow's strategy to counter efforts by Rifaat al-Assad, brother of Syrian President

⁴ From the talk of President of the Azerbaijan Republic Heydar Aliyev with President of Syria Hafez Asad // Heydar Aliyev Heritage. Tehran. 09.11.1997. URL: <https://lib.aliyev-heritage.org/en/6299865.html> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

Hafez al-Assad, to stage a coup and overthrow the government in Syria. From March 11 to 13, 1984, Heydar Aliyev was in Damascus as a Soviet envoy. With Hafez al-Assad's knowledge and accompanied by Foreign Minister Farouk al-Sharaa, he met with Rifaat al-Assad. Moscow managed to neutralize the threat of a coup. Subsequently, Moscow responded to Hafez al-Assad's move against Rifaat. At the latter's request, newly appointed Vice President Rifaat al-Assad, accompanied by dozens of loyal officers, was hosted in Moscow during an official visit, after which Hafez al-Assad refused to accept his brother back into Syria and expelled him from the country⁵. Heydar Aliyev later reflected on these events: "In 1984, I was urgently sent to Damascus. According to Soviet security reports, a rift was taking place in Syria between Hafez al-Assad and his brother Rifaat, who was chief of intelligence at the time. The Kremlin was unwilling to tolerate a change of regime or leaders in Syria. So, I went immediately to Damascus and met Hafez al-Assad, who was ill and undergoing treatment. Despite his illness, we talked for eight hours. Shortly afterward, he expelled his brother Rifaat from the country. The problem was solved and the Politburo sighed in relief"⁶.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the attainment of independence, Azerbaijan adopted a multi-vector foreign policy, deliberately avoiding formal alliance commitments to preserve flexibility in its regional and global partnerships. In its efforts to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) conflict, Baku actively pursued the diversification of its foreign relations. Within this context, strengthening ties with the broader

Islamic world, including Arab countries, emerged as one of several strategic priorities. Although Azerbaijan showed interest in developing relations with Syria, Damascus was never a central focus for Baku, particularly during the early post-independence period. Turkey continued to serve as Azerbaijan's principal strategic partner, as Baku aligned itself with Ankara in both political and cultural terms. Nevertheless, Azerbaijan pursued limited yet purposeful efforts to develop constructive ties with Syria.

On January 16, 1992, Syria recognized the independence of Azerbaijan, and diplomatic relations between the two countries were established on March 28, 1992. Until the Azerbaijani embassy was established in Syria in 2008, cooperation between Syria and Azerbaijan was quite limited⁷. The Azerbaijani ambassador to Egypt also covered Syrian affairs. Information about this period is rather scarce. Hafez al-Assad and Heydar Aliyev met for the first time after the collapse of the USSR only on December 9–11, 1997, during the 8th Summit of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Tehran⁸. Their conversation took place in a warm atmosphere as they recalled events from the 1980s. Hafez al-Assad noted that Syria was interested in establishing deep ties with Azerbaijan. Heydar Aliyev then dwelled on the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, highlighting the occupation of twenty percent of Azerbaijan by Armenia and other related facts; however, the Azerbaijani source does not document al-Assad's response, it is possible that the Syrian president avoided the topic. The subsequent conversation focused on the appointment of ambassadors⁹. Hafez al-Assad also touched upon the Nagorno-Karabakh

⁵ Abdulrahman al-Rashed, When Russia received Rifaat al-Assad as an exile // *Al-Arabiya*. 20.05.2020. URL: <https://english.alarabiya.net/views/news/middle-east/2016/02/09/When-Russia-received-Rifaat-al-Assad-as-an-exile> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

⁶ *Hamidi I.* A Once Powerful Patriarch Returns to an Unrecognizable Syria // *New Lines Magazine*. 26.10.2021. URL: <https://newlinesmag.com/essays/a-once-powerful-patriarch-returns-to-an-unrecognizable-syria/> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

⁷ *Pashayan A.* (2025, May 12). Interview with Anonymous Armenian Diplomat 1. Personal archive, Yerevan.

⁸ From the talk of President of the Azerbaijan Republic Heydar Aliyev with President of Syria Hafez Asad // *Heydar Aliyev Heritage*. Tehran. 09.11.1997. URL: <https://lib.aliyev-heritage.org/en/6299865.html> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

⁹ *Ibid.*

conflict during the OIC Tehran summit. His speech once again suggests that Syria's position on the Armenia-Azerbaijan confrontation was comparatively balanced. In the section of his speech entitled "Avoiding Disagreements Through Dialogue," the Syrian President, referring to the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, specifically noted: "It should be emphasized that the further continuation of tensions between Azerbaijan, a member of our organization, and Armenia creates factors of anxiety, fear and instability in the region, as well as contributes to the weakening and loss of the strength and capabilities of both countries, instead of directing them to reconstruction and restoration" [Pashayan 2003: 203].

It is noteworthy that Syria has not established an embassy in Azerbaijan; rather, its embassy in Tehran handled Azerbaijani diplomatic matters as well. Throughout this period, Syria maintained a relatively neutral stance regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, advocating a peaceful solution. Nonetheless, Azerbaijan at times expressed suspicions that Syria may provide political support to Armenia in this conflict, a concern attributed to the influence of the Armenian community residing within Syria. Moreover, the period of strengthened Syrian-Turkish relations, initiated by the Adana Agreement in 1998 and lasting until 2011, coincided with a notable intensification of Syrian-Azerbaijani relations. It is clear that the Syrian President avoided harsh criticism of Armenia to maintain a stance of positive neutrality. In any case, active interaction in Syrian-Azerbaijani relations did not take place until the late 2000s.

Azerbaijan opened an embassy in Damascus only in May 2008, several years after establishing diplomatic relations with Syria. The years 2008–2009 can be regarded as perhaps the most active period in Syrian-Azerbaijani relations. Following his visit to Yerevan in June

2009, Bashar al-Assad made his first official visit to Azerbaijan on July 8, 2009. During a formal reception in honour of the Syrian president at the Gulistan Palace in Baku, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev emphasized the historical and cultural ties between the Azerbaijani and Syrian peoples, highlighting Islam as a unifying element. He once again invoked the legacy of Imam al-Din Nasimi, who lived and worked in Aleppo and is regarded as a prominent poet and philosopher of both Azerbaijan and the broader East, as a symbolic figure linking the two nations¹⁰. In his speech, Aliyev addressed a number of issues. Among the topics related to bilateral cooperation, energy emerged as particularly salient – an area of special interest to Syria. He emphasized that there is no doubt regarding the significant role of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline in promoting regional development, enhancing international energy security, and increasing trade turnover¹¹. In line with his approach in international forums, President Aliyev brought up the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the occupation of Azerbaijani territories, anticipating an appropriate and supportive reaction from President Bashar al-Assad. Notably, in addressing the NK issue, Azerbaijan consistently invoked the principle of Islamic solidarity to garner support from the wider Arab and Islamic world. Baku successfully internationalized the dispute by prioritizing it on the agenda of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. In response, the OIC adopted a notably stringent and decidedly one-sided position against the Republic of Armenia, effectively aligning itself with Azerbaijan's interests [Pashayan, Navasardyan 2024].

By reframing the issue within the broader context of the Islamic agenda, Aliyev sought to elicit a proportional and supportive response from Muslim leaders across the region. In his

¹⁰ Официальный визит президента Сирийской Арабской Республики Башара аль-Асада в Азербайджан в честь высокого гостя [Official visit of the President of the Syrian Arab Republic Bashar al-Assad to Azerbaijan in honor of the distinguished guest] // Azertag. 09.07.2009. URL: https://azertag.az/ru/xeber/oficialnyi_vizit_prezidenta_siriiskoi_arabskoi_respubliki_bashara_al_asada_v_azerbaidzhan_v_chest_vysokogo_gostya-707595 (accessed: 24.07.2025).

¹¹ Ibid.

response, President Bashar al-Assad maintained a neutral position, deliberately refraining from issuing any direct criticism of Armenia¹². Meanwhile, the Syrian President expressed hope that the Karabakh conflict would be resolved peacefully, and, most importantly, in a manner that took into account the rights of both sides. He even offered Syria's mediation, noting good relations with both parties: "We declare our readiness to provide the necessary assistance in the settlement of the Armenian-Azerbaijani, Nagorno-Karabakh conflict"¹³. Bashar al-Assad did not make any statements against Armenia in Baku, despite Ilham Aliyev's expectations¹⁴. He maintained a stance of positive neutrality on this and other issues sensitive to both sides. Years later, it became clear that Ilham Aliyev had mistaken Bashar al-Assad's balanced stance for a pro-Armenian position¹⁵, even though he consistently refrained from issuing any statements on Nagorno-Karabakh that might undermine Azerbaijan's territorial integrity or recognize the region as separate from Azerbaijani sovereignty. During the Thirty-Sixth Session of the OIC Council of Foreign Ministers, convened under the theme "Enhancing Islamic Solidarity" and held in Damascus from 23 to 25 May 2009, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation adopted a series of strongly worded resolutions reflecting a distinctly anti-Armenian stance¹⁶. During the session, Azerbaijan's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Elmar Mammadyarov, addressed the gathering and delivered

remarks condemning what he described as Armenian aggression against Azerbaijan¹⁷.

In Baku, the Syrian president declined to visit "Martyrs' Park," the pantheon of Azerbaijani soldiers who died in the Karabakh war; during his visit to Yerevan in June 2009, he refused to visit the Armenian Genocide Memorial Complex at Tsitsernakaberd. Accordingly, the Syrian president sought to balance the interests of Azerbaijan and Armenia, aiming to prevent the alienation of either side. Bashar al-Assad's visits to Yerevan and Baku were organized by Foreign Minister Walid Muallim, who informed senior diplomats at the Armenian Foreign Ministry that al-Assad would not visit Tsitsernakaberd in Yerevan and would not visit "Martyrs' Park" in Baku, so as not to damage relations with Turkey. Damascus clarified to Yerevan that the Syrian people and state have always shared the pain of the Armenian people concerning the Armenian Genocide, noting that the visit would not change anything in Armenian-Syrian relations. Certainly, the Azerbaijani side was also provided with appropriate explanations.

For Bashar al-Assad, economic issues were of utmost importance during his visit to Azerbaijan. Syria was pursuing an economic development and investment policy. In the early years after al-Assad came to power, investors in Syria were not in a hurry. Even in 2010, Syria ranked last or second to last among neighboring countries in terms of investment, trailing Turkey by almost a factor of 6.2, Israel by 4.75, Lebanon by 2.7, and Jordan by 1.15,

¹² Официальный визит президента Сирийской Арабской Республики Башара аль-Асада в Азербайджан в честь высокого гостя [Official visit of the President of the Syrian Arab Republic Bashar al-Assad to Azerbaijan in honor of the distinguished guest] // Azertag, 09.07.2009. URL: https://azertag.az/ru/xeber/oficialnyi_vizit_prezidenta_siriiskoi_arabskoi_respubliki_bashara_al_asada_v_azerbaidzhan_v_chest_vysokogo_gostya-707595 (accessed: 24.07.2025).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Pashayan A. Interview with Anonymous Armenian Diplomat 1. Personal archive, Yerevan. 12.05.2025; Azerbaijani President: We support new government of Syria // Azertag. URL: https://azertag.az/en/xeber/azerbaijani_president_we_support_new_government_of_syria-3496459 (accessed: 24.07.2025).

¹⁵ Pashayan A. (2025, May 12). Interview with Anonymous Armenian Diplomat 1. Personal archive, Yerevan.

¹⁶ Resolution No. 9/36-Pol on the Aggression of the Republic of Armenia Against the Republic of Azerbaijan // OIC. URL: <https://www.oic-oci.org/docdown/?docID=407&refID=29> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

¹⁷ Statement by Dr. Elmar Mamedyarov Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan // The MFA of Azerbaijan. URL: https://mfa.tj/uploads/main/2013/03/kitobi_oik.pdf (accessed: 24.07.2025).

surpassing only Iraq [Matveev 2022: 46]. Foreign direct investment in Syria from 2009 to 2010 also decreased due to the global economic crisis [Matveev 2022: 45]. Al-Assad hoped that economic cooperation between Syria and Azerbaijan, specifically the joint implementation of strategic projects for developing land, sea, and air routes in the oil and gas sector, would create a genuine opportunity to increase trade volume between the two countries. In Baku, al-Assad emphasized that there was a shared desire and extensive opportunities to enhance cooperation. He stated: “I am confident that the important strategic position of Azerbaijan in the Caucasus region and the important strategic position of Syria in the Middle East allow our countries to play the role of a bridge between Asia and Europe, the Middle East and the Caucasus”¹⁸.

Azerbaijan’s emergence as a major oil- and gas-producing state bolstered Aliyev’s confidence in the country’s expanding role in international relations, despite the continued occupation of approximately twenty percent of its territory by Armenia and the de facto separation of Nagorno-Karabakh from Azerbaijan between 1991 and 2023.

From President Aliyev’s speech, it is evident that Azerbaijan aimed to deepen bilateral cooperation with Syria, a stance that was positively received by the Syrian leadership. Fostering closer relations with the South Caucasus states, especially Azerbaijan, would allow Syria to mitigate its geographical limitations and enhance its strategic engagement with the region, which Bashar al-Assad characterized as the “Silk Road”¹⁹.

In Baku, al-Assad visited the Milli Majlis and met with the Speaker of the Azerbaijani Parliament, Ogtay Asadov. The latter noted that the visit would open a new chapter in Azerbaijan-Syria relations and hinted at the personal ties between Hafez al-Assad and Heydar Aliyev. Azerbaijani sources reported that the speaker addressed the NK conflict, emphasizing that Azerbaijan highly appreciates Syria’s support in preserving its territorial integrity, and that the Syrian president promised to do everything possible to deepen bilateral relations²⁰.

In 2012, recalling the visit, a member of the Azerbaijan-Syria parliamentary friendship group, Johar Bakhshaliyeva, noted that the Syrian president wrote heartfelt and kind words about Azerbaijan in the guest book. Bakhshaliyeva noted that media reports concerning the situation in Syria, particularly those reflecting opposition sentiments or anti-Assad narratives, were not always reliable²¹. She also noted that, during her visit to Damascus in 2010 for the OIC Central Committee meeting, the Syrian people appeared to genuinely support their president, based on her observations at the time²².

During Bashar al-Assad’s visit to Baku, a joint Azerbaijani-Syrian business forum was held, aimed at strengthening bilateral economic ties²³. Within the framework of the visit, an agreement was reached for the supply of 1–1.5 billion cubic meters of Azerbaijani gas to Syria. Fourteen documents were signed concerning the development of cooperation in various areas: shipping, agriculture, internal affairs, industry, healthcare, culture, tourism, education, information technologies, customs

¹⁸ Официальный визит президента Сирийской Арабской Республики Башара аль-Асада в Азербайджан в честь высокого гостя [Official visit of the President of the Syrian Arab Republic Bashar al-Assad to Azerbaijan in honor of the distinguished guest] // Azertag, 09.07.2009. URL: https://azertag.az/ru/xeber/oficialnyi_vizit_prezidenta_siriiskoi_arabskoi_respubliki_bashara_al_asada_v_azerbaidzhan_v_chest_vysokogo_gostya-707595 (accessed: 24.07.2025).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Syrian President meets Milli Majlis speaker in Baku // Azertag, 09.07.2009. URL: https://azertag.az/en/xeber/syrian_president_meets_milli_majlis_speaker_in_baku-583948 (accessed: 24.07.2025).

²¹ Azərbaycanlı deputat: “Bəşər Əsəd mənimlə görüşmək istəyirdi...” // Modern, 07.09.2012. URL: <https://modern.az/tehsil/28354/azerbaycanli-deputat-beser-esed-menimle-grusmek-isteyirdi/> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

²² First PUIC Extraordinary Conference // PUIC, 05.07.2010. URL: <https://en.puic.org/news/2326> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

²³ Ibid.

issues, electricity, renewable energy, and more²⁴. Finally, on November 23, 2010, the sides agreed on the technical details of a 20-year natural gas purchase²⁵. The expansion of relations with Baku was also directly linked to the progress of Turkish-Syrian relations. The rapprochement between Syria and Azerbaijan was endorsed by Turkey, which served as the primary external backer of Baku in matters related to Syria. For Azerbaijan, Syria remained relatively unfamiliar terrain, and without Ankara's assistance, Baku was unlikely to succeed²⁶. The year 2009, which marks the peak of Azerbaijan-Syria relations, is directly linked to the progress observed in Syria-Turkey relations during the same period. In 2009, Syria-Turkey relations reached their highest point. During this period, the two countries developed active diplomatic, economic, and cultural cooperation. Syria and Turkey abolished visa requirements for each other's citizens, facilitating freer movement and deeper bilateral engagement²⁷. At the time, under the leadership of the Justice and Development Party, Turkey was actively pursuing its “zero problems with neighbors” policy. While this approach was widely criticized as overly unrealistic, Syria was nonetheless considered part of the framework and was seen as a key partner within the scope of this foreign policy doctrine [Özcan 2012]. President Erdoğan and President al-Assad frequently exchanged visits, and several high-level meetings were held in 2009. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad also praised Turkey's role as peacemaker in the Syrian-Israeli indirect peace talks, which he described as “reliable”. He said that “they still needed Turkey's impartial mediatory role in the peace process”²⁸.

In an interview, an Armenian diplomat noted that during the warming of relations between Syria and Turkey, Bashar al-Assad became very cautious toward the Armenian community to ensure that the community's anti-Turkish sentiments would not cast a shadow over closer Damascus-Ankara relations. Even books related to the Armenian Genocide were removed from bookstores²⁹. Bashar al-Assad believed that warming relations with Turkey would positively impact the development of the Syrian economy. This Turkish-Syrian rapprochement before the “Arab Spring” created certain opportunities for Syrian-Azerbaijani rapprochement³⁰. However, the Syrian war that began in 2011, which caused great tension in Turkish-Syrian relations, negatively influenced Azerbaijan as well. From the onset of the Syrian conflict, Turkey has been the single most important influential sponsor of the Syrian insurgency, including the Free Syrian Army (FSA) [Gasanova 2022: 45–46]. The Syrian regime has labelled the FSA and other armed opposition groups as “terrorists,” alleging that Turkey, together with Qatar and Saudi Arabia, has supplied financial assistance for the procurement of weapons [Bishku 2012: 50].

Turkey has been providing extensive support to Syrian opposition and rebel forces, including Salafi-oriented groups such as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham [Gasanova 2022: 45]. Ankara also supported the Syrian National Council, maintained a hardline stance on the removal of al-Assad and the formation of a transitional governing authority, and consistently adopted an inflexible approach to issues concerning Kurdish autonomy in Syria. In a 2012 inter-

²⁴ Азербайджан и Сирия намерены заключить долгосрочное соглашение по поставкам газа [Azerbaijan and Syria set to conclude a long-term agreement on gas supplies] // Azertag 04.03.2010. URL: https://azertag.az/ru/xeber/AZERBAIDZHAN_I_SIRIYA_NAMERENY_ZAKLYUCHIT_DOLGOSROCHNOE_SOGLASHENIE_PO_POSTAVKAM_GAZA-719471 (accessed: 24.07.2025).

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Interview with Anonymous Armenian Diplomat 2. 12.06.2024. Online. Personal archive, Yerevan.

²⁷ Syrian, Turks, Exempted from Visa Requirements // Syria Report. 21.09.2009. URL: <https://syria-report.com/syrian-turks-exempted-from-visa-requirements/> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

²⁸ Saban Kardas, Turkey Boosts its Ties with Syria and the Middle East // Eurasia Daily Monitor. Vol. No. 171. 16.09.2009 URL: <https://jamestown.org/program/turkey-boosts-its-ties-with-syria-and-the-middle-east/> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

²⁹ Interview with Anonymous Armenian Diplomat 1. 12.05.2025. Yerevan (Personal archive).

³⁰ Ibid.

view with the Turkish newspaper *Cumhuriyet*, al-Assad accused Turkey of interfering in Syria's internal affairs³¹. Considering the military cooperation between Turkey and Azerbaijan, along with the “one nation, two states” concept that entered official discourse in 2010 under Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu – a figure also associated with Neo-Ottomanism – these two states are often perceived jointly in the international arena. As noted by Z. Karayel, Turkey and Azerbaijan have benefited both individually and collectively by developing and pursuing shared interests. Alongside the deepening of “brotherly” relations between their societies, the two countries have gradually formed a security community grounded in mutual trust, strategic cooperation, and increasingly coordinated foreign policy priorities [Karayel 2024: 393–394].

Naturally, the Syrian authorities tended to associate Azerbaijan with Turkey. It can be said that a chill in bilateral relations was noticeable fairly early, albeit in a latent form. Azerbaijan closed its embassy in Damascus in 2012. In August 2012, the Azerbaijani ambassador and all embassy personnel departed from Syria. At the time, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan cited escalating security concerns and the deteriorating situation in the country as the primary reasons for the indefinite suspension of its diplomatic mission. The ministry also reported that, with the assistance of the embassy, more than 50 Azerbaijani nationals residing and working in Syria left the country independently³². Azerbaijan relocated its embassy to Lebanon immediately after the closure of its mission in Damascus. The Azerbaijani ambassador accredited to Syria visited Damascus from Beirut intermittently. He familiarized himself with the situation on the ground, established limited contacts, and then departed. Over time, however, these visits

ceased³³. As a result, Azerbaijani-Syrian relations remained stagnant for 13 years, until December 2024. Bilateral agreements, including the gas deal, never materialized. The crisis in bilateral relations is directly tied to the deterioration of Syria-Turkey relations since 2011. The change of regime in Syria on December 8, 2024, has altered the dynamics of Syrian-Azerbaijani relations, with Azerbaijan expressing a willingness not only to enhance multilateral cooperation but also to engage in the reconstruction of Syria.

Evolving Syria-Azerbaijan Relations Amid the Syrian War

After 2011, relations between Syria and Azerbaijan became somewhat complicated due to the “Arab Spring.” The anti-government movements occurring in Arab countries, which had a domino effect, also negatively impacted the domestic political life of Azerbaijan. Initially, there were widespread predictions that the authoritarian regime in Azerbaijan could also collapse under the influence of the Arab revolutions. A number of protests took place in Azerbaijan, which according to reports from international human rights organizations, were brutally suppressed by the Azerbaijani authorities, with demonstrators being arrested and tortured [Bulent, Lacin 2021]. The Qatari media, particularly Al Jazeera, which played a prominent role in covering the “Arab Spring” movements, occasionally referred to Azerbaijan, suggesting that “the Arab Spring is knocking on Azerbaijan’s door”³⁴. Meanwhile, growing social problems contributed to recruitment efforts in and around certain mosques to encourage individuals to travel to Syria.

Azerbaijani militants who traveled to Syria – though their exact numbers remain unclear – have reportedly fought on both sides of the conflict, including within pro-Assad Shia

³¹ Assad: Erdogan has lost his credibility // Aljazeera 04.07.2012. URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2012/7/4/assad-erdogan-has-lost-his-credibility> (accessed 26.01.2026).

³² Kaleji V. Syria and Azerbaijan: What Changes Are Coming After the Fall of Bashar al-Assad? // Valdai Club 07.03.2025. URL: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/what-changes-are-coming-after-the-fall-of-assad/> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

³³ Interview with Anonymous Armenian Diplomat 2. 12.06.2024. Online. Personal archive, Yerevan.

³⁴ Arab Spring knocks at Azerbaijan's door // Al-Jazeera. 12.04.2011. URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2011/4/12/arab-spring-knocks-at-azerbajians-door> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

forces and Sunni-oriented opposition groups. There is documented evidence that Azerbaijani nationals have been recruited into the Iran-backed Shia radical group *Husseini'yon* and have fought in Syria. Some of these individuals were imprisoned upon their return to Azerbaijan³⁵. A large number of Sunni Azerbaijanis fought in groups associated with al-Qaeda*, including *Jabhat al-Nusra** and *ISIS**. Some Azerbaijanis were also involved in pro-Turkish terrorist organizations. There is no definitive number of Azerbaijani citizens who participated in military operations in Syria and elsewhere. Vali Kaleji, an expert in regional studies and the Caucasus, noted that estimates of the number of Azerbaijani citizens who joined the so-called “Caliphate”³⁶ varied widely, ranging from 400 to 1,000. While the overall number of Azerbaijani fighters involved in the Syrian civil war was relatively limited, the spread of Salafist ideology was seen as a potential threat to the country’s secular political framework. Evidence indicates that the majority of Azerbaijani fighters entered Syria via Turkey. The latter and Azerbaijan maintain a visa-free regime, and the porous nature of Turkey’s borders had made effective control challenging.

In response, the authorities of both countries engaged in close cooperation to prevent the further movement of Azerbaijani nationals to Syria. During a press conference in Ganja on February 19, 2014, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu emphasized that Ankara was ready to collaborate with Baku on initiatives

aimed at curbing Azerbaijani participation in the Syrian conflict. Although there are claims that some Azerbaijani militants fought in groups close to Bashar al-Assad, this has not been substantiated. Several Azerbaijani fighters died during the war, while others were arrested years after returning to Azerbaijan, as participation in the war in Syria was declared a criminal offense under Azerbaijani law. In public political discussions in Azerbaijan, the topic of Azerbaijanis allegedly going to jihad has received extremely negative evaluations. Notably, in January 2014, the Caucasus Muslim Board released an official statement (fatwa) condemning any sort of involvement in armed conflicts in the name of religion, and, consequently, refused to refer to Azerbaijanis who fight abroad as “martyrs”³⁷.

The international tension surrounding Syria, including the unprecedented Turkey-Syria tensions, prompted Baku to gradually decrease, but not completely freeze, relations with Damascus. In December 2019, with financial support from the Azerbaijan International Development Agency and with assistance from the Embassy of the Republic of Azerbaijan in Jordan, humanitarian aid, including food and medical products, was distributed to 400 Syrian families settled in Jordan³⁸. During the Syrian war, Azerbaijan did not pursue any strategic interests in Syria. The parties maintained their relations through international organizations. Azerbaijan favored suspending Syria’s membership in the OIC in 2012³⁹. Initially, Azer-

³⁵ *Jameel R.* *Husseini'yon: A Profile of the Iranian-backed Militia Threatening Azerbaijan* // Jamestown. Terrorism Monitor. 25.02.2022. Vol. 20. No. 4. URL: <https://jamestown.org/program/husseiniyon-a-profile-of-the-iranian-backed-militia-threatening-azerbaijan/> (accessed: 19.10.2025).

* Terrorist organizations banned in Russia.

³⁶ In June 2014, *ISIS** announced the establishment of a “Caliphate” across territory it had captured in Syria and Iraq, with its capital in Raqqa, led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who declared himself the Caliph, the supposed religious and political leader of all Muslims. The group promoted an extreme, violent interpretation of Salafi-jihadism, enforcing strict Sharia law, committing widespread atrocities, and recruiting foreign fighters from around the world. At its height (2014–2015), the “Caliphate” controlled large swaths of northeastern Syria and western Iraq.

³⁷ *Aslanova L.* *Documentary Appears About Azerbaijani Fighters in Syria* // Eurasia Daily Monitor. 25.07.2014. Vol. 11. No. 136. URL: <https://jamestown.org/program/documentary-appears-about-azerbaijani-fighters-in-syria/> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

³⁸ *Azerbaijan sends humanitarian aid to Syrian refugees in Jordan* // Azer news. 29.12.2012. URL: <https://www.azernews.az/nation/48120.html> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

³⁹ The Syrian Arab Republic’s membership in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation was only reinstated on March 9, 2025; OIC Secretary-General Welcomes Syria’s Resumption of OIC Membership // Saudi Press Agency. 09.03.2025. URL: <https://www.spa.gov.sa/en/N2278017> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

bajjan was cautious and refrained from making assessments of the Syrian president and developments in Syria.

However, Azerbaijan broke its silence and reacted strongly when, in July 2012, the Armenian authorities allowed Armenian refugees from Syria to settle in Nagorno-Karabakh and adjacent regions. Baku condemned the settlements in the occupied territories as illegal and unacceptable⁴⁰. In January 2018, Azerbaijan fully supported Turkey's military operations against the PYD-YPG and ISIS* in the Syrian city of Afrin. During Turkey's "Olive Branch" operation in Afrin in 2018, Foreign Ministry spokesman Hikmet Hajiyev stated that "Azerbaijan fully understands Turkey's security concerns and supports the fight against terrorism"⁴¹. In 2019, when Turkey launched "Operation Peace Spring" in northern Syria, the Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry expressed support for Turkey, noting that the operation would help prevent terrorist threats and ensure regional stability⁴². The approaches of Turkey and Azerbaijan regarding the Syrian issue were synchronized, and the Syrian authorities associated the two states. The Syrian authorities also claimed to possess information that, in addition to Azerbaijanis involved in jihadist groups, Azerbaijani soldiers had fought in Idlib as part of the Turkish regular army, with their actions coordinated with the Azerbaijani authorities⁴³. Before departing for the Non-Aligned Movement summit in Baku on October 25–26, 2019, the Syrian delegate, in con-

versation with an Armenian diplomat, expressed dissatisfaction with Baku's persistent efforts to include the conflict with Armenia on the agendas of international organizations⁴⁴. As expected, the issue could not be entirely avoided and was ultimately reflected in the summit's declaration.

Tensions between Baku and Damascus escalated during the Second Karabakh War (September 27–November 10, 2020). On October 6, 2020, in an interview with the Russian RIA news agency, Bashar al-Assad said that Turkey had initiated the Karabakh war and noted that Syrian mercenaries were fighting in Azerbaijan, recruited by Turkey: "He (Erdogan) supports terrorists in Libya, (and) he was the main instigator and initiator of the recent conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh between Azerbaijan and Armenia"⁴⁵. Azerbaijan and Turkey have repeatedly denied the participation of Syrian mercenaries in the NK war on Azerbaijan's behalf, instead accusing Armenia of sending mercenaries from Syria and Lebanon to the Karabakh front. After the Nagorno-Karabakh war, Azerbaijan-Syria relations reached a final impasse⁴⁶.

Azerbaijan as a Mediator: Navigating Israeli-Turkish Tensions over Syria and Beyond

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Israel and Azerbaijan have developed close diplomatic ties grounded in two key pillars: economic pragmatism and a shared strategic interest in containing Iran's influence across

⁴⁰ Embassy: Baku concerned over resettlement of Syrian Armenians to Azerbaijan's occupied lands// Today Az.30.10.2013. URL: <http://www.today.az/news/politics/127709.html> (accessed 19.01.2026).

* Terrorist organizations banned in Russia.

⁴¹ Azerbaijan backs Turkey's operation in Syria's Afrin // Energy Terminal. 22.01.2018. URL: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/energy/energy-security/azerbaijan-backs-turkey-s-operation-in-syria-s-afrin/16497> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

⁴² Azerbaijan voices support for Operation Peace Spring // Anadolu Ajansı. 11.10.2019. URL: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/azerbaijan-voices-support-for-operation-peace-spring/1610244> (accessed: 24.07.2025); Azerbaijan comes out in support of Turkish military operation in Syria // Jam news. 12.10.2019. URL: <https://jam-news.net/azerbaijan-comes-out-in-support-of-turkish-military-operation-in-syria/> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

⁴³ Interview with Anonymous Armenian Diplomat 2. 12.06.2024. Online. Personal archive, Yerevan.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Assad accuses Turkey's Erdogan of igniting Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict // Reuters. 06.10.2020. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/assad-accuses-turkeys-erdogan-of-igniting-armenia-azerbaijan-conflict-idUSKBN26ROU0/> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

⁴⁶ The Syrian mercenaries used as 'cannon fodder' in Nagorno-Karabakh // BBC. 10.12.2020. URL: <https://www.bbc.com/news/stories-55238803> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Middle East⁴⁷. Tehran has always been very sensitive regarding Azerbaijan-Israel relations. However, strained Israeli-Turkish relations and the 2008 war between Georgia and Russia undermined this idea; nevertheless, Azerbaijan and Israel have maintained their relations at a strategic level. Israeli interest in aligning with Azerbaijan is driven in part by oil imports from Azerbaijan, which reportedly supply an estimated 30 percent of Israel's oil consumption through the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline [Murinson 2010: 28]. Over time, relations between Azerbaijan and Israel evolved into a strategic partnership, with Israel becoming one of the main suppliers of weapons to Azerbaijan⁴⁸.

In addition to fostering strong bilateral ties with both Turkey and Israel, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev has, over the past decades, actively pursued efforts to mediate and improve relations between the two countries. In 2010, Baku launched several initiatives aimed at restoring dialogue between the two countries. Tensions escalated sharply following the 2010 Mavi Marmara incident, which significantly strained Turkey-Israel relations and threatened to further destabilize regional dynamics⁴⁹. Positioned at the intersection of the Middle East, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia, Azerbaijan had a strategic interest in fostering regional cooperation and minimizing polarization among its key partners. Capitalizing on its strong bilateral ties, particularly with Israel in the fields of defense, intelligence, and energy, and with Turkey through deep historical and cultural connections, Baku attempted to mediate between Ankara and Tel

Aviv in the hope of easing tensions and encouraging diplomatic re-engagement. While President Ilham Aliyev's efforts reflected Azerbaijan's growing diplomatic ambition and desire to perform a regional balancing role, these initiatives ultimately failed to yield a concrete breakthrough. Azerbaijan lacked the international influence and political leverage necessary to facilitate a major geopolitical realignment. Beginning around 2018, Azerbaijan quietly promoted channels of communication between Israel and Turkey, setting the stage for more formal mediation efforts in later years. Positioned as a trusted partner to both nations, Azerbaijan leveraged its strategic neutrality and shared interests to encourage dialogue, particularly as tensions rose over overlapping deployments in Syria and shifting geopolitical alignments in the post-Nagorno Karabakh conflict. While no formal breakthrough occurred in 2018, these efforts laid the groundwork for technical talks held in Azerbaijan and helped frame Baku's longer-term role as a regional facilitator⁵⁰. Ilham Aliyev's ability to build bridges between Israel and Turkey became an even more valuable factor, especially amid political and military developments in Syria since 2024, following the fall of the Bashar al-Assad regime.

The Middle East is undergoing a new geopolitical transformation, and Azerbaijan is seeking to assume an active role. Azerbaijan's diplomatic maneuvers, particularly its hosting of Israeli-Turkish discussions on Syria in April 2025, are a case in point. On 9–10 April 2025⁵¹, senior Turkish and Israeli officials met in Baku, Azerbaijan, in a technical, high-level dialogue aimed at establishing deconfliction

⁴⁷ *Namazova F., Valiyev A.* Azerbaijan-Israeli Relations in the Wake of the Middle Eastern Crisis // Global Panorama. 15.08.2025. URL: <https://www.globalpanorama.org/en/2025/08/azerbaijan-israeli-relations-in-the-wake-of-the-middle-eastern-crisis/> (accessed 19.01.2026).

⁴⁸ *Kogan E.* Israel and Azerbaijan: Trusted friends and reliable partners // Middle East Institute. 03.04.2023. URL: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/israel-and-azerbaijan-trusted-friends-and-reliable-partners> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

⁴⁹ *Tuna D., Çırıkara T.* The Potential for Azerbaijani Mediation of Turkish-Israeli Relations // Washington Institute for Near East Policy. 20.07.2021. URL: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/potential-azerbaijani-mediation-turkish-israeli-relations> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Israel confirms talks with Turkey on Syria aimed at preserving 'security stability' // The Times of Israel 10.04.2025. URL: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-confirms-talks-with-turkey-on-syria-aimed-at-preserving-security-stability/> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

mechanisms to prevent accidental military clashes in Syria. The talks were prompted by increased proximity between Turkish and Israeli military activities following the collapse of the al-Assad regime in late 2024, which created a power vacuum and intensified external involvement. Israel expressed concerns over potential Turkish force deployments near strategic sites, while Turkey framed its presence as part of efforts to stabilize Syria in coordination with new authorities and military support to Damascus⁵². The discussions remained narrowly focused on military risk management and did not signal broader diplomatic normalization amid ongoing political tensions between the two states. A mechanism will be established, similar to the one built between Israel and Russia⁵³.

Turkish government sources confirmed that the talks were brokered by Azerbaijan and emphasized the importance of establishing a communication channel to maintain stability and prevent clashes between Israel and Turkey on Syrian soil. The Israeli delegation, headed by National Security Adviser Tzachi Hanegbi, argued that any effort to deploy foreign military forces in Syria was a red line for the State of Israel⁵⁴. Tel Aviv has officially thanked Azerbaijan and President Ilham Aliyev for hosting the crucial talks in Baku. During the negotiations, each side presented its regional interests and priorities. Speaking at the annual ADA University policy forum in Baku on April 9, 2025, President Ilham Aliyev stressed Azer-

baijan's readiness to contribute to deepening dialogue between Israel and Turkey and overcoming tensions. Aliyev noted that both countries were strategic partners for Azerbaijan. "We are allies with Turkey, and Israel is a friendly state of Azerbaijan, with which our mutual friendship has been proven many times, especially in difficult times. Therefore, the tension between the two countries is of serious concern to us," stressed the President of Azerbaijan in his speech⁵⁵.

Baku's mediation efforts are based on security interests and economic pragmatism⁵⁶. Azerbaijan's interest in mediating over Syria is not merely diplomatic: it is rooted in strategic motivations and broader geopolitical calculations. Establishing a new government in Syria, which enjoys political-military support from Turkey, creates economic and political opportunities. Azerbaijan seeks to join efforts with Turkey to marginalize Iranian and Russian influence in Syria. It is important to note that during the visit of Ahmad al-Sharra, interim President of Syria, there was a meeting between Syrian and Israeli representatives. The meeting marked one of the first indirect contacts between Syrian and Israeli officials since the fall of the al-Assad regime. Its focus on Israeli operations inside Syria highlights the security concerns on both sides and Azerbaijan's willingness to provide a neutral setting for sensitive dialogue⁵⁷. The meeting between Israeli and Syrian officials reportedly focused on the Israeli military presence in southern Syria. For

⁵² *Abdukerim I.* Assessments of Israel-Türkiye Flashpoints in Syria // Al Zaytouna Center for studies and consultations. July 2025. URL: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/393494203_Assessments_of_Israel-Turkiye_Flashpoints_in_Syria (accessed 26.01.2025). 21 p.

⁵³ Israel and Turkey hold Syria deconfliction talks to avoid military clash // The Times of Israel. 10.04.2025. URL: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-and-turkey-hold-syria-deconfliction-talks-to-avoid-military-clash/> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

⁵⁴ *Berman L., Freiberg N.* Israel confirms talks with Turkey on Syria aimed at preserving security stability // Times of Israel. 10.04.2024. URL: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-confirms-talks-with-turkey-on-syria-aimed-at-preserving-security-stability/> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

⁵⁵ All Israel News Staff, "Both Countries Are Close Friends: Azerbaijan Hosts First High-Level Meeting to Calm Israel-Turkey Tensions in Syria" // All Israel News. 09.04.2024. URL: <https://allisrael.com/both-countries-are-close-friends-azerbaijan-hosts-first-high-level-meeting-to-calm-israel-turkey-tensions-in-syria> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

⁵⁶ *Delanoë I. P.* Israel-Azerbaijan: An Alliance in Search of Renewal // FMES Institute. 28.07.2021. URL: <https://fmes-france.org/israel-azerbaijan-an-alliance-in-search-of-renewal/> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

⁵⁷ Syrian, Israeli officials meet in Baku in normalisation process with limited scope // Arab Weekly. 14.07.2025. URL: <https://www.theArabweekly.com/syrian-israeli-officials-meet-baku-normalisation-process-limited-scope> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

Damascus, these indirect talks were crucial for the potential reinstatement of the 1974 Disengagement Agreement, especially with regard to halting military actions and restoring UN monitoring of the demilitarized zone between the two sides⁵⁸.

In early July, Syria announced its willingness to cooperate with the United States to re-establish the disengagement agreement. Azerbaijan, as a mediation arena, proved insufficient; on July 13, 2025 – one day after the meeting of the Israeli-Syrian delegations in Baku, hostilities between Bedouins and the Druze community members began in the Southern city of Sweida in Syria. The Israeli air force was involved in defending Druze forces against attacks by government troops⁵⁹. From time to time, rising tensions reveal that the situation in Syria remains highly complex and still has a long way to go before it can reach clarity or stability. In any case, Azerbaijan's mediation efforts are unlikely to succeed as long as multiple conflict hotspots persist across the broader Middle East region. It is impossible for the deep-rooted contradictions between Turkey and Israel to be fully resolved through Azerbaijan's mediation alone. Israel and Turkey continue to compete over spheres of influence in Syria, and the Palestinian issue also remains a significant factor. While it is evident that Azerbaijan has not emerged as an effective mediator in this context, these efforts have nonetheless enhanced its regional and international visibility. This reflects Baku's aspiration to assert itself as a rising power in the region, despite the lack of concrete out-

comes. Anyhow, even if multiple actors engage as mediators in Israel-Turkey and Israel-Syria relations like Azerbaijan, the final structuring and capitalization of these processes will ultimately be led by the United States. Studies of U.S. foreign policy show that the United States has historically taken the central role in mediating major Middle Eastern conflicts – most notably, in Arab-Israeli negotiations – acting as the principal broker and agenda-setter in peace processes⁶⁰.

Azerbaijani expert Rovshan Mamadli argues that Azerbaijan would not oppose operating under U.S. patronage. However, Israel's regional hegemonic ambitions, coupled with its interest in maintaining instability in Syria, leave little room for optimism regarding mediation efforts⁶¹. At the same time, it is reasonable to expect that Azerbaijan's activities and its potential influence on Middle Eastern affairs – particularly in the Syrian context, including mediation efforts – will, to a significant extent, depend on Ankara. In many instances, the strategic interests of Ankara and Baku closely align on the international stage. Turkey has played a key role in elevating Azerbaijan's international profile, which, in turn, enables Ankara to address various regional and global issues with Baku's backing. Nevertheless, although Azerbaijan possesses certain resources and ambitions to act as an independent regional player, it remains largely aligned with Ankara's foreign policy agenda. Baku tends to position itself in accordance with Turkey's interests and priorities, especially in matters of regional significance⁶².

⁵⁸ [Al-Sharaa] الشرح في أول زيارة رسمية إلى أذربيجان... ولقاء مباشر سيعقد بين مسؤولين سوري وإسرائيلي في باكو is on his first official visit to Azerbaijan... and a direct meeting will be held between Syrian and Israeli officials in Baku // Al-Quds. 12.07.2025. URL: <https://www.alquds.co.uk/أذربيجان-في-أول-زيارة-رسمية/> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

⁵⁹ Israel launches heavy airstrikes in Damascus, vowing to protect Druze // Reuters. 17.07.2025. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/clashes-resume-syrias-druze-city-sweida-after-ceasefire-announcement-2025-07-16/> (accessed: 19.10.2025).

⁶⁰ Syria and Israel Revive Security Talks Mediated by the U.S. // The New York Times. 06.01.2026. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/06/world/middleeast/syria-israel-us-talks-paris.html> (accessed: 19.01.2026); Türkiye 'has played a very integral role in getting to this ceasefire' in Gaza, says US official // Anadolu Ajansı. 15.01.2026. URL: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/americas/turkiye-has-played-a-very-integral-role-in-getting-to-this-ceasefire-in-gaza-says-us-official/3799744> (accessed 19.01.2026).

⁶¹ Azerbaijan's expanding footprint in the Middle East // New Arab. 28.08.2025. URL: <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/azerbajjans-expanding-footprint-middle-east> (accessed: 19.10.2025).

⁶² Interview with Anonymous Armenian Diplomat 3. 16.08.2025. Online. Personal archive, Yerevan.

New Approaches to Syrian-Azerbaijani Relations in the Post-Assad Period

The Azerbaijani authorities welcomed the departure of Bashar al-Assad from power on December 8, 2024. Following the collapse of the Syrian regime, the President of Azerbaijan held a telephone conversation with the President of Turkey to discuss the evolving situation⁶³. Official statements from Azerbaijan have indicated intentions to establish friendly bilateral relations with the new Syrian administration. Baku characterized these relations as hindered by the former Syrian regime's leadership. This leadership reportedly created significant difficulties for Azerbaijan in various international forums, including the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. In these forums, Syria's position was viewed as inconsistent with the principles of Islamic solidarity⁶⁴. Our research during this period suggests that Baku's publicly expressed attitude towards the al-Assad regime has been largely instrumental. Baku's hostility towards Bashar al-Assad is not due to the regime's pro-Armenian stance, but rather stems from Turkey's own position on the matter.

The process of restoring Azerbaijan's relations with Syria officially began in late December 2024, with the Azerbaijani Foreign Minister announcing the renewal of diplomatic ties on December 10. "At this crucial moment, as friendly and partnership ties between Azerbaijan and Syria enter a new phase and fresh opportunities emerge for cooperation in political, economic, cultural, and other spheres, our embassy will support the development of bilateral relations through close collaboration with Syria's transitional government", the ministry's statement read⁶⁵. Days after the power shift, on December 29, Azerbaijani Deputy

Foreign Minister Yalcin Rafiyev met with Asad al-Shaibani, the Foreign Minister of the interim government. He stated that Azerbaijan "stands with Syria alongside the Republic of Turkey at this crucial new stage". Rafiyev was the first senior official to visit Syria since the events of the "Arab Spring". He also assured his counterpart that Azerbaijan was ready to offer support for Syria's reconstruction. In return, Shaibani emphasized that Azerbaijan's liberation of its territories from occupation was crucial for promoting global peace and stability, and extended his congratulations to the Azerbaijani people⁶⁶.

On December 30, the day after their meeting, Azerbaijan sent its first humanitarian aid to Syria, five tons of supplies intended for people in need in Idlib province. The aid was distributed via Turkey's Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency. On February 17, 2025, Azerbaijan restored diplomatic relations with Syria. The Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry issued a statement confirming that the chargé d'affaires in Damascus had assumed his duties. The ministry noted that this move marks a new phase in bilateral relations, aimed at strengthening cooperation across numerous political, economic, and cultural sectors⁶⁷. On February 18, 2025, President Aliyev sent a congratulatory message to transitional President Ahmad al-Sharaa, congratulating him and wishing him success, security, stability, and prosperity for Syria. Aliyev reaffirmed Azerbaijan's support for the Syrian people during this transition, expressed a desire to strengthen bilateral cooperation, and invited al-Sharaa to Baku⁶⁸. During the meeting, President Aliyev reiterated that the primary reason for the past deterioration in Azerbaijan-Syria relations was the former

⁶³ *Novruz A.* Former regime in Syria caused significant challenges for Azerbaijan in int'l organizations, says Hajiyev // *Azernews*. 25.07.2025. URL: <https://www.azernews.az/nation/235051.html> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Azerbaijan reopens embassy in Syria after 13-year closure* // *Jam news*. 18.02.2025. URL: <https://jam-news.net/azerbaijan-reopens-embassy-in-syria-after-13-year-closure/> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

⁶⁶ *Azerbaijan's deputy foreign minister meets with Syria's new foreign minister in Damascus* // *anadolu ajansi*. 29.12.2024. URL: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/azerbaijans-deputy-foreign-minister-meets-with-syrias-new-foreign-minister-in-damascus/3437541> (accessed 19.01.2026).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *President Ilham Aliyev congratulates Syria's transitional President* // *Azerbaijan*. 14.02.2025. URL: <https://azerbaijan.az/en/news/15236> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

Syrian administration's "unfortunately pro-Armenian and anti-Azerbaijani stance," noting frequent contacts and cooperation between Armenian and Syrian officials during that period⁶⁹. Remaining consistent with Azerbaijan's logic of acting in association with Turkey in Syria, we are inclined to believe that Aliyev sought to conceal the true reasons behind the deterioration of Azerbaijan-Syria relations and instead shift the blame onto Armenia.

The Azerbaijani authorities drew parallels between the reconstruction of Syria and that of Azerbaijan, noting that Azerbaijan's experience can be used in efforts to restore Syria, with a focus on Nagorno-Karabakh. In turn, the new Syrian authorities compared "the establishment of people's power in Syria and the historic victory of Azerbaijan"⁷⁰.

An important question moving forward is which areas will be prioritized in Azerbaijani-Syrian bilateral cooperation. Official statements from Baku indicate that significant steps are likely to be taken in the field of energy. At the 4th Antalya Diplomatic Forum, held from April 11–13, 2025, President Ilham Aliyev met with Syrian interim President Ahmad al-Sharaa to discuss a range of issues⁷¹. During the meeting, President Aliyev emphasized Azerbaijan's readiness to contribute to Syria's post-war reconstruction as a means of supporting long-term stability in the country. Among the potential areas of cooperation, energy emerged as a key focus, with particular atten-

tion to Syria's oil and gas sector⁷². President Aliyev expressed interest in contributing to the rehabilitation of Syria's energy infrastructure, including the development of oil and gas fields in the country's northwest, drawing on Azerbaijan's extensive expertise in both industries⁷³. The State Oil Company of the Azerbaijan Republic, a globally recognized energy brand, is expected to represent Azerbaijani interests in Syria. According to Elchin Ibadov, General Director of SOCAR's Turkish branch, the company is prepared to engage in Syria's energy sector⁷⁴. Given the strategic alignment between Azerbaijan and Turkey, it is anticipated that SOCAR Turkey will play a leading role in these efforts. Energy cooperation between Syria and Azerbaijan holds the potential to yield significant mutual benefits⁷⁵. Finally, on August 2, 2025, an export project for gas supply to Syria was launched in Kilis, Turkey. The ceremonial event was attended by representatives from Azerbaijan, Turkey, Syria, and Qatar. According to the agreement, Azerbaijan supplies the gas, Turkey provides logistics and transit (route: Kilis → Yavuzlu → Aleppo/Homs), and the deliveries are carried out under a swap scheme⁷⁶.

SOCAR is expected to continue playing the role of energy supplier in the region under Ankara's auspices. Establishing a presence in Syria would enable Azerbaijan to overcome its geographic constraints and deepen its engagement with the broader Middle East, including

⁶⁹ Farhadova A. Aliyev invites interim Syrian President al-Sharaa to visit Azerbaijan // OC Media. 14.04.2025. URL: <https://oc-media.org/aliyev-invites-interim-syrian-president-al-sharaa-to-visit-azerbaijan> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

⁷⁰ Syrian Foreign Ministry: Azerbaijan's liberation of its lands from occupation is a significant event // APA. 29.12.2024. URL: <https://en.apa.az/foreign-policy/syrian-foreign-ministry-azerbajians-liberation-of-its-lands-from-occupation-is-a-significant-event-456974> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

⁷¹ Ilham Aliyev met with Syrian Interim President of Syria in Antalya // President of the Republic of Azerbaijan. 11.04.2025. URL: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/68548> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Syria seeks Azerbaijan's help to develop oil and gas fields // Middle East Eye. 18.04.2025. URL: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syria-seeks-azerbajians-help-develop-oil-and-gas-fields> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

⁷⁵ Energy cooperation between Türkiye and Azerbaijan: A strategic partnership // Daily Sabah. 22.03.2025. URL: <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/op-ed/energy-cooperation-between-turkiye-and-azerbaijan-a-strategic-partnership> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

⁷⁶ Export of Azerbaijani Gas to Syria via Türkiye Has Commenced // Socar Türkiye. 02.08.2025. URL: <https://www.socar.com.tr/press-release/export-of-azerbaijani-gas-to-syria-via-turkiye-has-commenced> (accessed: 19.10.2025).

the Euro-Mediterranean region. Such a presence could also pave the way for future collaboration with the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, thereby expanding Azerbaijan's regional energy partnerships. Syria's land border with Turkey offers a strategic advantage, potentially facilitating access to the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) and the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP), key routes for transporting energy to European markets. Enhanced energy cooperation between Baku and Damascus could, in turn, amplify Azerbaijan's influence within the European energy sector⁷⁷. In recent years, Azerbaijan has emerged as one of the key actors in European energy security, notably increasing its natural gas exports, much of which consists of re-exported non-Azerbaijani gas. The country has expressed its intention to further expand its export volumes. Looking ahead, Azerbaijan may also explore the possibility of exporting oil and gas to Israel via Syrian territory, further integrating itself into the regional energy architecture and enhancing its geopolitical significance. Syria, however, remains a fragile and contested region, which could pose significant obstacles to Azerbaijan's energy engagement⁷⁸.

The Syrian authorities have a strong interest in establishing a stable security architecture and engaging with Azerbaijan's energy diplomacy. It is no coincidence that, under the directive of President Ahmad al-Sharaa, Turkmen General Fehim Isai, commander of the Second Corps of the Syrian National Army, was appointed Deputy Minister of Defense and Commander

of the Northern Region. This appointment signals Damascus's intention to recalibrate its military leadership in alignment with broader strategic priorities, including regional cooperation, security stabilization, and energy sector engagement. The Syrian new administration has also cultivated a notable relationship of trust and collaboration with the Turkmen community, which it regards as a key demographic within the evolving regional landscape. In this context, Turkmen-populated areas of Latakia province could soon emerge within Azerbaijan's strategic purview as potential zones for investment and infrastructure development⁷⁹.

During the Antalya meeting, President Ilham Aliyev expressed Azerbaijan's readiness to contribute to Syria's post-conflict reconstruction efforts. He also extended a formal invitation to President al-Sharaa to visit Azerbaijan⁸⁰. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan continues to send humanitarian aid to Syria. In January 2025, Azerbaijan delivered 200 tons of aid to Syria's Aleppo province, again with Turkey's support⁸¹. Azerbaijan's policy in post-conflict Syria can even be considered proactive. Humanitarian aid and official visits followed one another in succession. On May 4, an Azerbaijani delegation led by Deputy Prime Minister Samir Sharifov arrived in Damascus at the invitation of the Syrian interim government⁸². During a meeting with Ahmad al-Sharaa, the Azerbaijani and Syrian parties discussed opportunities for cooperation in the economy, energy, culture, and education⁸³. The visit came after a meeting between al-Sharaa and Aliyev on the sidelines

⁷⁷ Export of Azerbaijani Gas to Syria via Türkiye Has Commenced // Socar Türkiye. 02.08.2025. URL: <https://www.socar.com.tr/press-release/export-of-azerbaijani-gas-to-syria-via-turkiye-has-commenced> (accessed: 19.10.2025).

⁷⁸ Azerbaijan-Türkiye gas corridor to Syria under fire // Daily Sabah. 22.07.2025. URL: <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/op-ed/azerbaijan-turkiye-gas-corridor-to-syria-under-fire> (accessed: 19.10.2025).

⁷⁹ Kurdistan Watch // X. URL: <https://x.com/KurdistanWatch/status/1912425991059763266> (accessed: 19.10.2025).

⁸⁰ From mediation to reconstruction: Azerbaijan expands its Middle East role // News Az. 15.04.2025. URL: <https://news.az/news/-from-mediation-to-reconstruction-azerbaijan-expands-its-middle-east-role> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

⁸¹ Azerbaijan sends 200 tons of food aid to Syria // Anadolu Ajansi. 30.12.2024. URL: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/azerbaijan-sends-200-tons-of-food-aid-to-syria/3437796> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

⁸² Azerbaijani delegation visits Syria // Azertag. 04.05.2025. URL: https://azertag.az/en/xeber/azerbaijani_delegation_visits_syria_video-3538907 (accessed: 24.07.2025).

⁸³ Ibid.

of the Antalya Diplomatic Forum in Turkey, where the two leaders talked about possible collaboration. Notably, Syria's pro-Turkish administration has actively sought to demonstrate its strong interest and high expectations for deepening cooperation with Azerbaijan. Shortly after the invitation extended in Antalya, Ahmad al-Sharaa arrived in Baku on an official visit on July 12. The Syrian Interim President's visit to Baku marked the tenth stop on his diplomatic tour, following official visits to nine other countries. The Syrian delegation was officially welcomed by President Ilham Aliyev at the Zagalba Palace. During their meeting, President Aliyev underscored the importance of the visit in advancing and strengthening bilateral relations⁸⁴.

Syrian Interim President Ahmad al-Sharaa expressed regret that the foreign policy choices of the Bashar al-Assad government had unnecessarily harmed Syria's relations with several states, including Azerbaijan, implicitly criticizing the former regime's approach and indicating a desire to recalibrate Syria's external relations under the new Islamist leadership⁸⁵.

That was the message Aliyev wanted to hear. Al-Sharaa mentioned that Baku could meet some of Syria's energy needs, particularly through gas supplies via Turkey. The leaders' discussion also covered educational cooperation, especially opportunities for Syrian students to participate in Azerbaijani educational programs. Syria also expressed interest in leveraging Azerbaijan's experience in rebuilding post-war Syria, highlighting Azerbaijani reconstruction efforts in Karabakh⁸⁶.

During the visit, Syria and Azerbaijan signed a memorandum of understanding, cov-

ering cooperation in energy and the supply of natural gas to Syria. The agreement includes coordination on energy issues, supplying Syrian needs for natural gas through Turkey, and joint efforts in oil exploration⁸⁷. In Baku, Ahmad al-Sharaa paid tribute to the memory of National Leader of the Azerbaijani people – architect and founder of the modern independent Azerbaijani state – Heydar Aliyev, and laid a wreath at his grave⁸⁸. Ahmad al-Sharaa's visit to Baku marks a turning point in bilateral relations, as it signaled a shift in the political agenda. Despite Syria's ongoing economic and political collapse, the country is signaling its intention to pursue recovery by reorienting its foreign policy. Al-Sharaa's foreign policy approach is fundamentally different from that of Bashar al-Assad. The new direction in Syria's foreign policy appears satisfactory for Ilham Aliyev, who prioritizes expanding his geopolitical influence, undermining Armenia's position in Syria, and weakening the role of the Armenian community within the country. Al-Sharaa's visit to Baku goes beyond the scope of bilateral relations, as it reflects broader geopolitical reconfigurations in the region. Baku's open rapprochement with Islamist Syria is certainly viewed with concern both by Russia and Iran, which, after investing significant resources in Syria and ultimately facing defeat, will now closely monitor developments and may possibly respond in some way.

The Decline of the Armenian Factor and the Emerging Role of Azerbaijan in Syria

Within the context of Azerbaijan-Syria relations, the Armenian factor holds particular relevance, as Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev has

⁸⁴ *Frantzman S.J.* Syrian president visits Azerbaijan to strengthen energy, diplomatic ties – analysis // The Jerusalem Post/Middle East. 12.07.2025. URL: <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-860779> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

⁸⁵ President of Syria Ahmad al-Sharaa has arrived in Azerbaijan on an official visit // Aze Media. 12.07.2025. URL: <https://aze.media/president-of-syria-ahmad-al-sharaa-has-arrived-in-azerbaijan-on-an-official-visit/> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

⁸⁶ *Frantzman S.J.* Syrian president visits Azerbaijan to strengthen energy, diplomatic ties // The Jerusalem Post. 12.07.2025. URL: <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-860779> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

⁸⁷ Syria and Azerbaijan Sign Memorandum of Understanding on Energy Cooperation // Welat. 13.07.2025. URL: <https://welatv.com/en/node/15010> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

⁸⁸ Transitional President of Syria visits tomb of National Leader Heydar Aliyev // Azernews. 12.08.2025. URL: <https://www.azernews.az/nation/244577.html> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

frequently contrasted Armenia-Syria and Azerbaijan-Syria ties. He has pointed to what he perceives as a pro-Armenian stance by President Bashar al-Assad regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. “Unfortunately, during the previous leadership, Syria took a very pro-Armenian and anti-Azerbaijani position,” stated Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev during his address at the international forum Facing the New World Order held at ADA University in Baku on April 9, 2025⁸⁹. However, this article concludes that the al-Assad regime’s official position on the conflict has, in fact, remained largely balanced and neutral. As early as 2007, in a meeting with Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov, Bashar al-Assad stressed that Syria fully recognizes Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity and advocates for a peaceful resolution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict⁹⁰. Bashar al-Assad reaffirmed his position during his 2009 visit to Baku⁹¹. In contrast to Azerbaijan-Syria relations, Armenia-Syria relations were established earlier and have evolved more rapidly. Geopolitical researcher Dr. Mariam Kazemi argues that one of the reasons for the limitations in Syria-Azerbaijan relations has been Syria’s cooperation with Armenia.

“Under Assad’s rule, Azerbaijan-Syria relations faced limitations due to several factors, including the anti-Azerbaijani and anti-Turkish stance of Syria’s Armenian diaspora and the strategic alignment between Syria and Armenia. During this period, Syria adopted positions in international organisations that were at odds

with Azerbaijan’s interests, refusing to take a firm or objective stance on territorial integrity issues. Syrian leadership even made statements in platforms like the OIC that contradicted the principle of Islamic solidarity”⁹².

A crucial link in the development of bilateral ties has been the local Armenian community, which has contributed significantly to Syria’s socio-economic and cultural life. The Armenian community has long enjoyed respect both from Syrian society and from the country’s leadership⁹³. During the Syrian crisis, the Armenian community was often perceived externally as supportive of the al-Assad government. However, in practice, the community adopted a position of positive neutrality, refraining from direct involvement in military activities except in cases of self-defense, particularly in the protection of Armenian-populated areas⁹⁴. The prospect of regime change in Syria and the possible establishment of a Turkish-aligned administration have raised concerns among the country’s Christian minorities, including the Syrian-Armenian community. As with other Christian groups, the Armenians adopted a cautious and restrained stance during the conflict, driven by concerns over their security and the preservation of their communities. In particular, the prospect of extremist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra* ascending to power was perceived as a direct threat, heightening fears of targeted violence and religious persecution⁹⁵. The war had a profound impact on the Armenian community and on areas of Syria with substantial Armenian

⁸⁹ Azerbaijani President: We support the new government of Syria // The Azerbaijan State News Agency-Azertag 09.04.2025. URL: https://azertag.az/en/xeber/azerbaijani_president_we_support_new_government_of_syria-3496459 (accessed: 26.01.2026).

⁹⁰ Bashar Assad: Syria recognizes Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and supports peaceful solution to Karabakh conflict // Today Az 12.04.2007. URL: <https://www.today.az/news/politics/39265.html> (accessed: 26.01.2026).

⁹¹ Syrian President meets Milli majlis speaker in Baku // The Azerbaijan State News Agency- Azertag. 09.07.2009. URL: https://azertag.az/en/xeber/syrian_president_meets_milli_majlis_speaker_in_baku-583948 (accessed: 26.01.2026).

⁹² New Dynamics In The Azerbaijan-Syria Axis Amid Shifting Geopolitical Changes // International Peace Studies Centre. 16.07.2025. URL: <https://peace-ipsc.org/2025/07/16/new-dynamics-in-the-azerbaijan-syria-axis-amid-shifting-geopolitical-changes/> (accessed: 19.10.2025).

⁹³ Interview with Anonymous Armenian Diplomat 4. 20.06.2025. Online, Yerevan. Personal archive.

⁹⁴ Hovyan V. On political view of the Armenian community in Syria // Noravank. 06.05.2013. URL: http://www.noravank.am/eng/issues/detail.php?ELEMENT_ID=7064 (accessed: 24.07.2025).

* Terrorist organizations banned in Russia.

⁹⁵ Interview with Anonymous Armenian Diplomat 2. 12.06.2024. Online. Personal archive, Yerevan.

populations, resulting in significant and irreversible human and material losses. These conditions, in turn, triggered large-scale emigration from the community⁹⁶.

Throughout the Syrian crisis, Armenia maintained comparatively active diplomatic engagement with the government of Bashar al-Assad and notably stood out as the only country to sustain an uninterrupted diplomatic presence in Aleppo, operating its General Consulate continuously throughout the conflict⁹⁷. In 2019, following the ascent of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and at the recommendation of Russian President Vladimir Putin, Armenia established a Humanitarian Mission Center in Aleppo. This initiative underscored Armenia's dedication to supporting Syria during the crisis and simultaneously contributed to deepening bilateral relations between Yerevan and Damascus⁹⁸. The Center has undertaken a wide range of operations in Syria, including demining efforts, the distribution of humanitarian aid, and the provision of medical services. Armenia's humanitarian engagement has been broadly recognized and valued in Syria⁹⁹.

Armenia faced criticism from the West, including the United States, for opening a humanitarian center in Syria at Russia's suggestion¹⁰⁰. On February 13, 2020, amid escalating tensions in Turkish-Syrian relations, the Syrian Parliament officially recognized and condemned the Armenian Genocide committed by the Ottoman Empire. The move was met with very positive reactions in Armenia and the

Diaspora, as Syria became the second country after Lebanon to officially recognize the Armenian Genocide. Since November 2024, events in Syria took a dramatic turn, and the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in 2024 was followed by tension in Yerevan. Following the change of power in Syria, spiritual leaders of the Armenian Apostolic, Catholic, and Evangelical communities in Aleppo, Damascus, Kessab, and other locations, alongside leaders of other remaining Christian communities, received formal security assurances¹⁰¹. However, security threats to minority groups in Syria have not only persisted but, in many cases, intensified in the aftermath of the regime change. Notable examples include the atrocities committed against the Alawite community in March 2025, the terrorist attack on the Mar Ilia Christian Church in Damascus on June 22, and a series of massacres targeting the Druze community since July 13.

Within this broader context, concerns within the Armenian community remain closely linked to Syria's ongoing economic crisis, political instability, and deteriorating security environment. In response to the regime change, Armenia dispatched a single humanitarian aid shipment to Syria¹⁰². Since that time, only one official Armenian delegation, led by Deputy Foreign Minister Vahan Kostanyan, has visited Syria. During the visit, Kostanyan met with Asaad al-Shaibani, Foreign Minister of the Syrian Transitional Government. Both parties emphasized the longstanding historical ties between the Armenian and Syrian peoples and

⁹⁶ Syria // Diaspora. URL: <http://diaspora.gov.am/en/pages/51/syria> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

⁹⁷ Armenian Consulate General was the only diplomatic mission that never stopped operating in Aleppo – FM Nalbandian // Abaka news. 23.10.2017. URL: <https://abakanews.org/news/armenia-and-artsakh/armenian-consulate-general-diplomatic-mission-never-stopped-operating-aleppo-fm-nalbandian/> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

⁹⁸ The Aleppo mission: Armenian experts' first week // Mediamax. 19.02.2019. URL: <https://mediamax.am/en/specialprojects/special-report/32334/> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

⁹⁹ Armenian humanitarian group continues mission in Syria despite COVID19-related restrictions // Armenpress. 17.04.2020. URL: <https://armenpress.am/en/article/1012497> (accessed: 26.01.2026).

¹⁰⁰ U.S. unhappy with Armenian deployment in Syria // Azatutyun. 13.02.2019. URL: <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/29768146.html> (accessed: 19.10.2025).

¹⁰¹ Interview with Anonymous Armenian Diplomat 4. 20.06.2025. Online, Yerevan. Personal archive, Yerevan.

¹⁰² The Republic of Armenia has sent humanitarian aid to the Syrian Arab Republic // The MFA of the Republic of Armenia. 21.03.2025. URL: https://www.mfa.am/en/press-releases/2025/03/21/humanitarian_aid/13133 (accessed: 24.07.2025).

expressed their support for initiatives aimed at promoting solidarity and inclusiveness within Syria. However, despite these diplomatic engagements, significant challenges persist in the country's political and social landscape, limiting progress toward sustainable stability¹⁰³.

In practice, the new Syrian leadership has openly adopted a distinctly pro-Azerbaijani stance. This position was explicitly demonstrated during the inaugural high-level meeting between Syrian and Azerbaijani officials on December 29, 2024, when Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaibani commended Azerbaijan for what he described as the liberation of its territories from Armenian occupation. Al-Shaibani further characterized this development as a significant contribution to global peace and stability, and extended his congratulations to the Azerbaijani people¹⁰⁴. There has been a significant shift in bilateral relations, with a clear indication that Armenia-Syria ties will no longer mirror the close partnership they once shared¹⁰⁵. Currently, the relationship between Armenia and Syria is effectively at a standstill. Armenia appears to be relinquishing its influence in Syria, creating a vacuum that Azerbaijan is increasingly filling.

This shift has generated a sense of uncertainty within the Syrian-Armenian community regarding their future. The new Syrian leadership is unlikely to prioritize or invest in maintaining close ties with Armenia, marking a departure from the era of Bashar al-Assad's rule. During his tenure, the friendly relations between Armenia and Syria significantly bolstered the morale and well-being of the Armenian community in the country. Armenia-Syria relations will no longer resemble the close partnership of the past. Instead, Azerbaijan-Syria relations have gained considerable momentum. The Syrian-Armenian community itself is unlikely to recover to its pre-war state, having been profoundly affected

by the conflict. The weakening of the Armenian community and its institutional presence in Syria carries important geopolitical and ideological implications, particularly benefiting Turkey and Azerbaijan. This dynamic can be understood through several key dimensions. Historically, the Armenian community in Syria has played a vital role in preserving Armenian cultural identity, especially concerning the historical memory and international recognition of the Armenian Genocide. For Turkey, which persistently denies the Armenian Genocide, the erosion of diaspora communities championing this cause serves a clear strategic advantage. Similarly, Azerbaijan also benefits from the weakening of Armenian diaspora communities, as the resulting vacuum enables Baku to expand its influence more directly. In this context, the Armenian community in Syria has historically functioned not only as a cultural and religious hub but also as a key instrument of Armenia's soft power in the Middle East. Through its educational, religious, and communal institutions, the community contributed to the development of Armenian-Syrian relations and served as an important bridge between Armenia and the Arab world. The decline of this community therefore represents not merely a cultural and demographic loss, but also a significant geopolitical weakening of Armenia's regional presence and influence, from which Azerbaijan may strategically benefit.

Azerbaijani expert Lala Khalizade's view on the reasons behind the failures in Azerbaijan-Syria relations serves to support nearly all of the arguments mentioned above. She notes: "Unfortunately, under the former Syrian regime, relations with Azerbaijan did not reach a stable level due to a number of factors. Among them were the anti-Azerbaijani and anti-Turkish stance of the Armenian diaspora in Syria, as well as the friendly ties between Syria and Armenia, a country with which Azerbaijan had

¹⁰³ The meeting of Deputy Foreign Minister of Armenia with the Foreign Minister of the Syrian Arab Republic // The MFA of the Republic of Armenia. 27.01.2025. URL: https://www.mfa.am/en/press-releases/2025/01/27/kostanyan_syria/13054 (accessed: 24.07.2025).

¹⁰⁴ Azerbaijan's deputy foreign minister meets with Syria's new foreign minister in Damascus // Anadolu Ajansı. 29.12.2024. URL: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/azerbajjans-deputy-foreign-minister-meets-with-syrias-new-foreign-minister-in-damascus/3437541> (accessed: 24.07.2025).

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Anonymous Armenian Diplomat 4. 20.06.2025. Online, Yerevan. Personal archive.

a conflict”¹⁰⁶. It is noteworthy that Khalizadeh also echoes Azerbaijan’s official narrative, claiming that under Bashar al-Assad, Syria opposed the Islamic solidarity movement within international organizations, particularly the OIC, in order to support Armenia. However, this claim lacks a solid foundation, as no member state within the OIC can formally oppose the principle of Islamic unity, let alone vote against an agenda proposed by Azerbaijan – something Syria has never actually done.

* * *

The evolution of Azerbaijan-Syria relations reflects the influence of broader regional strategic dynamics rather than purely bilateral considerations. Prior to the Syrian conflict, interactions between the two states were cordial yet limited, lacking substantive economic and strategic engagement. The outbreak of the war in 2011, coupled with Turkey’s firm opposition to the al-Assad regime and its central role in shaping Azerbaijan’s regional alignment, prompted a temporary cooling of relations and Azerbaijan’s diplomatic withdrawal from Damascus. Baku also perceived the al-Assad regime as historically sympathetic to Armenian interests in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, while noting the declining influence of the

Armenian community in Syria. Although this perception did not fully align with Syria’s relatively balanced stance, it influenced Azerbaijan’s strategic calculations, reinforcing a sense of opportunity amid the concurrent political and social vacuum created by the weakening of the al-Assad regime. Within this context, Azerbaijan gradually assumed a secondary but supportive role in a Turkey-centered regional order, also taking on a mediating function as Syria experienced shifts in governance and regional alignments. Azerbaijan’s engagement has combined energy diplomacy and support for reconstruction initiatives, reflecting a pragmatic strategy that advances political visibility, economic interests, and regional influence at comparatively low cost. More broadly, Azerbaijan’s renewed involvement in Syria since 2024 exemplifies a wider trend in its foreign policy: the projection of geopolitical ambitions beyond the South Caucasus. This approach has gained momentum following Azerbaijan’s 2020 victory in the NK war and the subsequent restoration of territorial integrity. Overall, Azerbaijan’s strategy demonstrates a careful integration of diplomacy, economic engagement, and strategic alignment, highlighting its evolving role as a flexible and increasingly influential actor within regional affairs.

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АЗЕРБАЙДЖАНО-СИРИЙСКИЕ ОТНОШЕНИЯ

ДИНАМИКА И ПЕРЕЛОМНЫЕ МОМЕНТЫ (1992–2025)*

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Резюме

Эволюция отношений между Азербайджаном и Сирией отражает влияние более широких региональных процессов. До начала сирийского конфликта взаимодействие двух государств было дружественным, но без какой-либо значительной экономической или стратегической глубины. Начало гражданской войны в 2011 году в сочетании с решительной оппозицией Турции режиму Асада и её центральной ролью в формировании региональных предпочтений Азербайджана привели к временному охлаждению отношений и «дипломатическому исходу» Азербайджана из Дамаска. В то же время в Баку считали, что режим Асада, несмотря на снижение влияния армянской общины в Сирии, склонен к поддержке армянской стороны в конфликте вокруг Нагорного Карабаха. В этом контексте Баку постепенно занял второстепенную, но поддерживающую роль в региональном порядке, ориентированном на Турцию, одновременно выполняя посреднические функции по мере наступления перемен как внутри Сирии, так и в деятельности региональных альянсов. Взаимодействие Азербайджана с Дамаском включает элементы энергетической дипломатии и поддержку инициатив по восстановлению страны; такая линия нацелена на укрепление политической субъектности Баку в регионе, продвижение экономических интересов и расширение регионального влияния при сравнительно низких издержках. Деятельность Баку представляет собой комбинацию дипломатии, экономического взаимодействия и стратегического расчёта, что подчёркивает его эволюционирующую роль как гибкого и всё более влиятельного субъекта на Ближнем Востоке. Этот подход получил дополнительный импульс после победы в войне в Нагорном Карабахе в 2020 году. Возвращение Азербайджана в Сирию в конце 2024 г. является свидетельством проецирования амбиций страны за пределы Южного Кавказа.

Ключевые слова:

Азербайджан; Сирия; Турция; региональная геополитика; политические сдвиги; конфликт; энергетическая дипломатия