

# Regime Change in Syria

## How Azerbaijan Can Benefit from It?

*Ruslan Suleymanov*

In February 2025, I had the opportunity to visit Syria, which recently underwent a rapid regime change. Although this country may be considered far from the South Caucasus at first glance, it is much closer than is commonly believed. This underlines the broader point made by Svante Cornell in the Fall 2020 edition of Baku Dialogues that the “geopolitics of Eurasia and the Middle East have merged.” Today, Syria can be of great value to Azerbaijan.

The geopolitical shifts around Syria affect a number of countries that have long-standing relations with Baku, namely Russia, Türkiye, Iran, and Israel.

In this sense, Azerbaijan, which recently resumed the work of its embassy in Damascus after 13 years, can potentially play the role of a mediator between the opposing sides, primarily between Türkiye and Israel, which are at loggerheads over Syria (and other issues, including Gaza).

In addition, Syria is of great value to Azerbaijan in terms of culture. The Arab Republic has dozens of villages inhabited by thousands of Turkomans, an ethnic group close to the Azerbaijanis. In addition, the country has important objects for Baku, such as the tomb of the outstanding Azerbaijani poet Imadaddin Nasimi (1369-1418), which is located in Aleppo.

### *Baku and Damascus: the Thorny Path of Relations*

Diplomatic relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Syrian Arab Republic were established in March 1992. Over the years, interactions between Baku and Damascus

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have been quite active. In total, 20 documents on cooperation in various fields have been signed between Azerbaijan and Syria.

In December 2000, the Azerbaijani-Syrian Interparliamentary Working Group was founded, and in November 2009, the Joint Commission on Economic, Scientific, Technical, and Cultural Cooperation was established between the governments of the two countries. In July 2009, then-Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his wife officially visited Azerbaijan.

However, after the outbreak of the civil war in Syria in 2011, contacts between Baku and Damascus were de facto frozen.

In August 2012, the work of the Azerbaijani embassy in Damascus was suspended, and at least 60 Azerbaijani citizens were evacuated from Syria.

In addition, close contacts between Syria and Armenia were an additional obstacle to the development of Azerbaijani-Syrian relations. During the occupation of Azerbaijani territories by Armenia, hundreds of Armenian families were illegally resettled from Syria to Karabakh. All this happened with the active participation of the Syrian leadership.

“During the Assad era, Syria always sided with Armenia. In fact, it was united with Armenia against us. Just look at the letters Pashinyan sent to Assad and the official delegations he sent—the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Speaker of Parliament, and his deputy. They regarded Syria as a close ally,” President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev said in January 2025.

Even though Baku took a detached position on the conflict within Syria, Azerbaijan, as a donor state, provided active humanitarian aid to refugees affected by the humanitarian catastrophe.

In addition, Baku has been dealing with the repatriation of Azerbaijani citizens from Syria in recent years. Thus, in 2023, 60 people were repatriated from the Arab Republic to Azerbaijani territory. In total, 469 women and children have been repatriated from Iraq and Syria in recent years.

### *Baku and Damascus in the Post-Assad Era*

The rapid fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 did not come as a surprise to Azerbaijan. Concerning the events in Syria, Baku mainly follows Ankara’s policy, which has been involved in the Syrian conflict from the beginning.

“Following the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria and the formation of a new government, Azerbaijan became the second country, after Türkiye, to offer humanitarian

assistance there. We remain ready to provide any further assistance as needed,” Aliyev explained in January 2025.

Exactly three weeks after Assad fled, Azerbaijani Deputy Foreign Minister Yalchin Rafiyev visited Damascus, where he met with Asaad Hassan al-Shaibani, Syria’s Foreign Minister in the transitional government. During the meeting, an agreement was reached to restore the work of the Azerbaijani embassy in the country.

As a result, in February 2025, after 13 years, the diplomatic mission of Azerbaijan was reopened in Damascus. Also in February 2025, Aliyev sent a congratulatory letter to Ahmad al-Sharaa on assuming the office of the interim President of the Syrian Arab Republic for the transitional period, noting that “there are great opportunities for elevating the relations between Azerbaijan and Syria to a qualitatively new level and enrich our cooperation with new content.”

It is also noteworthy that on 1 April 2025, al-Sharaa sent Aliyev a congratulatory letter on the occasion of Eid al-Fitr.

Finally, the leaders of the two states met on 11 April on the sidelines of the Antalya Diplomacy Forum. During the meeting, Aliyev affirmed “Azerbaijan’s readiness to participate in the reconstruction efforts in Syria, which are crucial for consolidating stability within the country.” Furthermore, he extended an invitation to Ahmed al-Sharaa to visit Azerbaijan.

These seem like small steps, but together they demonstrate that the bilateral relationship has taken a qualitative turn for the better.

## *Economic Prospects for Azerbaijan in Syria*

Nowadays, there are important points of intersection between Azerbaijan and Syria in the economic sphere. Both countries have rich energy resources. Hydrocarbon production and potential energy sector partnerships bring Azerbaijan and Syria closer together.

With its oil and gas reserves, Baku has the potential to cooperate with Damascus in this area. Thus, SOCAR is already an active player in the regional energy market and is further strengthening its position by joining strategic projects in the Mediterranean basin.

One of the clearest examples of this is the signing in January 2025 of an agreement between SOCAR and Union Energy to acquire a 10 percent stake in one of the natural gas fields in the Mediterranean basin—the Israeli Tamar project. This project occupies an important place on the region’s energy map. The Tamar field, discovered in 2009 and operated since 2013, contains nearly 400 bcm of natural gas reserves. The project is

operated by the American energy giant Chevron. SOCAR's participation in such projects not only increases Azerbaijan's influence in the region's energy market, but also creates the basis for establishing new relations in other parts of the region.

Meanwhile, against the background that Syria's energy infrastructure has been seriously damaged due to the civil war and needs restoration, Azerbaijan's experience in the energy sector and access to international markets may be attractive to the new Syrian leadership.

As a matter of fact, al-Sharaa, while his meeting with Aliyev in Antalya, underscored "the future importance of Azerbaijan's assistance to Syria in sectors such as energy, infrastructure, and security."

Overall, Baku and Damascus have excellent prospects for increasing mutual trade, which has declined sharply in recent years.

During the Syrian conflict, trade turnover between Azerbaijan and Syria decreased almost twofold: from \$1.2 million in 2011 to \$502 thousand in 2023. Currently, the bulk of trade turnover comprises Azerbaijani exports of agricultural products to Syria, including legumes and tea.

## *The New Opportunities and Challenges around Syria*

In addition to economic ties, Azerbaijan has the opportunity to increase its political influence in the region. The reopening of Azerbaijan's embassy in Damascus could make Baku more involved in Middle East issues, holding a balance between Israel and the Muslim world.

At the moment, Israel and Türkiye are one step away from confrontation on Syrian soil. With close contacts with both countries, Baku has more than once played the role of a mediator between them.

A representative of al-Sharaa's inner circle in Damascus informed me that the new Syrian authorities "want to build bridges with all countries that are ready to play a constructive role in Syria," and "Azerbaijan has every opportunity to become a bridge between various external powers."

Presumably, Syria was one of the topics discussed in a 10 April meeting in Baku between delegations from the defense ministries and security services of Israel and Türkiye. As Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu noted, both sides "agreed to continue on the path of dialogue in order to maintain regional stability." In this regard, Baku is considered the best mediator between the two confronting sides.

Baku should pay special attention to the thousands of Turkomans, a Turkic minority in Syria that speaks Azerbaijani and needs attention from Azerbaijan.

In addition, Syria is important to Baku from a cultural point of view. As noted above, Nasimi's tomb is located in Aleppo. As I was able to verify personally, it is in good condition and was under the supervision of the previous Syrian authorities. But what will happen next with it is unknown. Azerbaijan could establish some sort of guardianship over this site or even make arrangements to move the tomb to Azerbaijani territory.

At the same time, despite relative stabilization and the formation of an inclusive government at the end of March 2025, there is still a risk of escalation of violence in Syria. The recent clashes of the Syrian Armed Forces with the Alawites in March and with the Druze in April speak to this point. Baku should pay particular attention to the fact that the ranks of various terrorist groups operating on Syrian territory, including Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which came to power and is banned by the UN Security Council, include people from Azerbaijan.

For instance, during the heyday of the Islamic State (IS) in the Middle East, the group recruited at least 900 Azerbaijani citizens, the Republic's State Security Service reported in September 2017.

Another challenge for Azerbaijan remains Iran, for which the fall of Assad's regime was a blow. It made Tehran concentrate on its domestic issues and pay more attention to its milieu, which has been manifested inter alia with more active and positive engagement with Azerbaijan. Also, its weakness might lead to a new escalation with Israel. Nowadays, there are many signs of would-be Israeli or American attacks against Iranian nuclear plants. It could lead to unforeseen consequences, including for the immediate environment of the Islamic Republic.

In a nutshell, the latest developments in Syria give Azerbaijan ample room to maneuver in the political and economic spheres. At the same time, instability in this country and tensions between external players make Baku extremely cautious and sensitive regarding the Syrian case.

On balance, a more active policy toward Syria seems to be in Azerbaijan's national interest.