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Prospects for Russian-Syrian relations

On January 28, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov, accompanied by the Russian President's Special Envoy on Syria Alexander Lavrentiev, paid a visit to Damascus.

The past leaves hope for the future

The history of relations between the two states includes different periods and types of relations based on national interests. In this process, it can often be noted that when the interests of the two states and peoples converge, friendly, partnership and allied interstate relations are observed. Conversely, when these interests clash irreconcilable, the relations between the two escalate and can lead to conflict.

It is better not to use the language of ultimatums with Russia, especially for a regime that admits the weakness of its army

Despite all the geopolitical changes at the turn of the 21st century, modern Russia remains one of the largest and most powerful nuclear states with great potential for intellectual, economic, military and cultural development. Moscow pursues a sovereign policy, advocates for strengthening global and regional security, and forming a multipolar structure of the modern world order to establish a more just world.

Such a course of Russian foreign policy reflects the interests of Syria, which has been the victim of constant attacks of international terrorism and foreign intervention since 2011. As is known, Moscow has been a reliable and trusted friend of the Syrian people and state since the Soviet period. The USSR and Russia have always adhered to a fair resolution of Arab-Israeli contradictions, condemned Israel's illegal occupation of part of the southern territories of the

Syrian Arab Republic in the Golan Heights region and also invariably provided military assistance to Damascus to strengthen Syria's defence and security. The Soviet Union was probably the most effective foreign economic partner of Syria, investing and building many large and important industrial facilities in Syria (especially in the field of energy: the hydroelectric Tishrin plant, a number of dams, oil pipelines), which stimulated the development of the Syrian state and the strengthening of its sovereignty.

Adhering to the principle of non-interference in the internal political affairs of foreign states, Russia, in relation to the current crisis of the civil conflict in Syria, supported intra-Syrian harmony and reconciliation of all socio-political parts of society, and called for the formation of an inclusive government with the participation and protection of the interests of all faiths and peoples of the republic. By supporting the legitimate Syrian authorities, Russia responded positively in 2015 to an official appeal from Damascus for assistance in the fight against the forces of international terrorism and extremism.

That is why Russian-Syrian relations have traditionally been characterised as friendly and partner relations. In 2015-2017, the level of trust and interest of the Syrian side in receiving external military assistance allowed the parties to coordinate the deployment of two military bases on Syrian territory (an air base in Hmeimim and a naval base in Tartus) for a period of 49 years.

The internal changes in Syria that took place on December 8, 2024, related to the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime and the coming to power of representatives of yesterday's radical opposition, namely Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS*), created a situation of uncertainty vis-à-vis the prospects for Syrian-Russian relations. It is still unclear, for example, what the fate of the Russian military bases in Syria will be.

As is known, HTS* and its leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa, are pro-Turkish representatives of the Syrian society (formerly the radical opposition). In many ways, the rapid success of HTS* in late November and early December, 2024, which culminated in their triumphant entry into Damascus, was the result of Ankara's active support. Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan (formerly the long-term head of the Turkish National Intelligence Organisation, during which the intra-Syrian conflict began) has repeatedly noted that the main problem in ensuring the success of the HTS* in those days was the threat of Russian interference in the intra-Syrian process. Also, according to Fidan, through negotiations, Ankara managed to convince Moscow to adhere to the position of non-interference and to abstain from the use force on the ground against the offensive of the radical opposition.

In this regard, Fidan has repeatedly praised Russian diplomacy and the political wisdom of President Vladimir Putin. This means that HTS* and its leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa, would hardly have been in power in Damascus today if Moscow had intervened on the side of their opponents (which should include not only Bashar al-Assad, but also all those who do not share the views of or disagree with HTS* and Türkiye). Accordingly, the new Syrian interim authorities should understand that Russia should be reckoned with. Russia stands for the territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic and, despite all Western anti-Syrian sanctions, has provided assistance to the Syrian people and is ready to continue to participate in ensuring the security of Syria through the operation of the military bases.

One should acknowledge that the president of the transitional period, Ahmed al-Sharaa, noted in his public speeches the importance of Russia, taking into account the positive experience of friendship between the two states since Soviet times, and that the fate of the Russian military bases in Syria would be decided through political dialogue (negotiations). It is obvious that al-Sharaa's opinion was influenced not only (and perhaps not so much) by his deep knowledge of history and politics, but also by the recommendations of his Turkish colleagues and friends. One way or another, however, all issues of interstate relations should be discussed with the current authorities.

First official visit of a Russian delegation to Damascus: prospects

Mikhail Bogdanov gave a generally positive evaluation of the visit and the negotiations with President Ahmad al-Sharaa and Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaibani.

“These talks”, noted Bogdanov, “was constructive and pragmatic, and both sides underlined the friendly relations between the two states since Syria gained independence following World War II”.

During the frank discussion of an entire range of issues of Russian-Syrian relations at the current critical stage, the desire to continue building multifaceted, bilateral cooperation, based on the principles of traditional friendship and mutual respect between Russia and Syria, was emphasised. At the same time, Russia confirmed its continued support for the unity, territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Syrian Arab Republic, as well as its readiness to provide the Syrian people with the necessary assistance in the post-crisis reconstruction of the country.

While exchanging views on the current situation in and around Syria, the importance of Syrians themselves solving internal problems through the establishment of a sustainable political process within the framework of an inclusive dialogue involving the entire spectrum of political forces and ethno-confessional groups of Syria was also stressed.

Russia considers the change of government in Syria to be an internal issue that does not change the nature of relations between the two countries. Russia is ready to provide the necessary assistance for the final stabilisation of the situation in Syria, in solving socio-economic problems and supports intra-Syrian agreement.

This visit, however, did not clarify the issue of the status of Russian military bases, which, obviously, will require more substantive and deeper consideration and negotiations.

At the same time, M. Bogdanov stressed that “Moscow understands the difficult situation in Syria; the Syrian authorities themselves say that they are temporary and plan to form a transitional government in March next year, after the month of Ramadan”.

In other words, the parties are not rushing to final conclusions until the status of the ruling regime is clarified in Damascus from ‘transitional’ to ‘permanent’. Ahmed al-Sharaa will have to confirm his legitimacy through elections and receive a mandate from all parts and strata of Syrian society. Therefore, for at least two more months, Damascus has time to consider the issue.

The opinions, spread in some media and social networks, that Syria accused Russia of making mistakes on the side of the former regime and demanded that Moscow apologise, pay compensation (almost reparations) and extradite Bashar al-Assad alive are **most likely subjective in nature**. It is better not to use the language of ultimatums with Russia, especially for a regime that admits the weakness of its army and mainly relies on external (Turkish) support. The experience of the Kiev regime is an obvious example of this.

Russia’s interest in maintaining its military bases in Syria is not being hidden, otherwise Moscow would have resolved the issue of their evacuation long ago and would not have discussed the topic of negotiations. At the same time, the Russian military presence in Syria will primarily be aimed at assisting the current Syrian authorities in strengthening defence and security. In other words, Russia, respecting the legitimate authorities, supports the state, not an individual (as the experience of Bashar al-Assad has shown). As for the fate of Assad, Russia does not expel its guests (especially those who asked for help). There was no trial against Assad in Syria. Russians do not trade people; they have oil, gas and other elements of the periodic table for this.

Alexandr Svaranc, February 03, 2025

* Organisation banned in the Russian Federation

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