

SYRIAN CRISIS AND THE SOUTH CAUCASUS STATES

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ABSTRACT

The Syrian civil war continues to be one of the most pressing issues in international politics. This war created different risks and threats for different regions. Europe has been in the headlines as the region affected the most by the humani-

tarian consequences of the crisis. However, not only wealthier European states, but also the already conflict-ridden and relatively less developed states in the Caucasus were also directly affected.

These effects stem primarily from this region's geopolitical location amid the three countries that are heavily involved in the crisis, namely Turkey, Iran and Russia. The civil war at the heart of the crisis and its consequences are being felt in all of the countries of the South Caucasus, especially throughout two spheres: in terms of their population's participation on the side of the fighters, and the refugees escaping the war zone to the South Caucasus.

This study aims to review the relations between South Caucasus states and Syria from a historical perspective, as well as to analyze the impact of the crisis both on the South Caucasus region in general, and on each republic in particular. To this end, the foreign policies of the South Caucasus states in regard to the crisis will be evaluated. The perception of the crisis in the states of the region and the effect on their foreign policies will be further detailed; Azerbaijan's attitude towards the crisis in its position as a non-permanent member of the U.N. Security Council and the security risks emerging from the civil war in Syria for the countries of the South Caucasus will also be analyzed.

KEYWORDS: *Syrian crisis, South Caucasus, Turkey, Russia, Iran.*

Introduction

This study focuses on the impact of the Syrian crisis both on the South Caucasus region in general, and on the region's republics in particular, for which purpose the place of the crisis in the foreign policies of the South Caucasus states will be evaluated. The latest developments in Syria have sent ripples through the South Caucasus, as well as other regions. The effects of the crisis in the South Caucasus stem primarily from the region's location between the three countries (Turkey, Iran and Russia) that are closely involved in the crisis. The three republics of the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia) have certain historical ties with Syria, however, they also heed close attention to the policies of Turkey, Iran and Russia when determining their own position and policies regarding Syria. The fluctuations in the bilateral and trilateral relationships among Turkey, Iran and Russia in relation to the crisis are being carefully monitored in the South Caucasus, which sometimes leaves South Caucasus states in a difficult position when formulating their own foreign policies.¹ Also a major concern in the region is the small group of refugees leaving Syria to settle in the South Caucasus region.

Going into more detail, the paper will discuss the perception of the crisis in the three regional states and the effects on their foreign policies; Azerbaijan's attitude towards the crisis as a non-permanent member of the U.N. Security Council; and the security risks emerging from the civil war in Syria for the countries of the South Caucasus will be analyzed.

¹ See: F.H. Lawson, "Syria's Mutating Civil War and its Impact on Turkey, Iraq and Iran," *International Affairs*, Vol. 90, Issue 6, November 2014, pp. 1351-1365; Z. Öniş, Ş. Yılmaz, "Turkey and Russia in a Shifting Global Order: Cooperation, Conflict and Asymmetric Interdependence in a Turbulent Region," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 37, Issue 1, 2016, pp. 71-95; R. Allison, "Russia and Syria: Explaining Alignment with a Regime in Crisis," *International Affairs*, Vol. 89, Issue 4, 2013, pp. 795-823.

Syrian Crisis and Azerbaijan

Of all the countries in the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan has been the most affected by the Syrian crisis, given its location bordering three countries (Turkey, Iran and Russia) that are heavily involved in the crisis, and with which it maintains bilateral relations. In addition, Azerbaijan is the only South Caucasus country that has been a non-permanent member of the U.N. Security Council during the crisis period.

There is little doubt that the perception of the crisis in Azerbaijan and its impact on foreign policy has been reflected in the country's overall foreign policy, particularly in its relations with Turkey, Russia, Iran, the United States, the European Union and China (the recent development of Azerbaijan's relations with the Arab states can also be included on this list), and in its non-permanent membership in the U.N. Security Council. Azerbaijan is following this process carefully in terms of the impact of the crisis on the Nagorno-Karabakh problem and the energy markets (as well as the Azerbaijan's energy policy), with a particular eye on the settlement of some of the Armenian families displaced from Syria on the Azerbaijani territories that are occupied by Armenia.

The historic and cultural ties and relations with Syria that were established during the Soviet Union maintain an important place in Azerbaijan's relations with Syria. Short-term shared history after the spread of Islam, the grave of the famous poet Imadeddin Nesimi (born in the Shamakhi region of Azerbaijan) in Aleppo, Syria, and the presence of religious sanctuaries in Syria (which are special from the perspective of the Muslim population in Azerbaijan, especially the predominant Shi'a community) are just some of the factors contributing to the countries' cultural and historical ties. The Soviet period saw developments in the bilateral relations under the influence of the historical-cultural ties that were supported by the rapport between the U.S.S.R. and Syria.

However, the quadrilateral Russia-Armenia-Iran-Syria relationship, with its geopolitical competitive nature vis-à-vis the Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey triangle (which maintained a rapport with the West during the 1990s) had an adverse effect on Azerbaijani-Syrian bilateral relations.² Allegations relating to the settlement of Syrian terrorist organizations on the Azerbaijani territories occupied by Armenia have caused a harsh reaction in Baku.³ In addition, scientists from Iran, Saudi Arabia, Armenia, and Syria all took part in archeological excavations in the occupied territories of Azerbaijan, without obtaining permission from Baku.⁴ It is for this reason that the mutual high-level visits between Azerbaijan and Syria were made only in the second half of the 2000s, after Syria's relations with Turkey had improved. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad made an official visit to Azerbaijan on 8-9 July, 2009,⁵ and a total of 20 agreements were signed between Azerbaijan and Syria during this visit.

Azerbaijan attached special importance to its relations with Syria during this period, with joint cultural events being organized and direct flights launched between Baku and Aleppo. With the rapprochement of Turkey-Syria relations, shortly before the outbreak of civil war in Syria, Azerbaijan's then Minister of Industry and Energy Natig Aliyev even signed an agreement during his visit to Syria on 1-4 March, 2010 for the sale to Syria of 1.5 billion cubic meters of Azerbaijani natural gas every year. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan supported Syria in the U.N. and in other international organiza-

² See: B. Aras, "Post-Cold War Realities: Israel's Strategy in Azerbaijan and Central Asia," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 5, Issue 4, 1998, pp. 68-82.

³ See: T. Gaffarov, *Azerbaijan History: Volume VII (1941-2002)*, Elm, Baku, 2008, p. 268 (in Azerbaijani).

⁴ See: *Ibid.*, p. 269.

⁵ See: "Azerbaijan-Syria Relations," available at [http://mfa.gov.az/files/file/Azerbaycan_-_Suriya_munasibetleri.pdf], 24 February, 2017 (in Azerbaijani).

tions on the issue of “Syria’s occupied Golan Heights,”⁶ and Syria has continuously supported the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan in the framework of the U.N. and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), although bilateral relations were broken off with the rise in internal tension and the outbreak of civil war in Syria.

Azerbaijan, in line with the spirit of its foreign policy, has taken a cautious approach to the crisis from the very beginning, trying not to become involved in a problem that was not particularly relevant to it. The first statements to come out of Azerbaijan about the developments in Syria were very general, while the general framework of Azerbaijan’s policy regarding Syria is that the country supports the position of the Arab League, rather than that of any party to the Syrian crisis.⁷ Azerbaijan’s former Foreign Ministry spokesperson Elman Abdullayev said: “Azerbaijan fully supports the efforts of the League of Arab States to resolve the situation in Syria, and at the same time, eliminate the crisis from the ground and ensure political stability.” Abdullayev went on to emphasize that Azerbaijan’s policy regarding the Syrian issue was based on tight solidarity and historical and cultural ties with the Arab world.

After the crisis started to threaten the territorial integrity of Syria, a declaration on “territorial integrity and stability” came to the forefront in Azerbaijan’s statements. It is notable that this change in Azerbaijan’s attitude towards the crisis occurred while the country was a non-permanent member and the president of the U.N. Security Council.⁸ It was unclear what the attitude of Azerbaijan would be towards the crisis when on 24 October, 2011 the country was elected a non-permanent member of the U.N. Security Council for the 2012-2013 period. The two proposals regarding the Syrian issue presented to the U.N. Security Council in 2012 failed to become a “decision” as Russia and China were in opposition. The first of these two proposals—entitled “Situation in the Middle East—Syria (S/2012/77)” —was presented to the U.N. Security Council for voting on 4 February, 2012⁹ and the second (S/2012/538) on 19 July, 2012.¹⁰ Azerbaijan, which does not usually vote against the permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, particularly Russia, on issues that are not related directly to Azerbaijan, voted in favor of the proposals.

Azerbaijan’s support of international initiatives is aimed at bringing peace to Syria, although at the same time it favors the solution of the problem within the framework of international law. In this regard, its endorsement of a non-intervention approach to Syria is appropriate to the current geopolitical climate and the spirit of Azerbaijani foreign policy. This prudent attitude allows Azerbaijan to maintain an equal distance from all parties to the conflict, while also maintaining diplomatic relations with Syria, even in the event of political regime change in the country.¹¹

⁶ “On Fourth Committee’s Recommendation, General Assembly Adopts 26 Texts On Mines, Decolonization, Atomic Radiation, Israeli Practices, Among Other Topics,” available at [<http://www.un.org/press/en/2007/ga10677.doc.htm>], 24 February, 2017; “General Assembly Adopts Broad Range of Texts, 26 in All, On Recommendation of its Fourth Committee, Including On Decolonization, Information, Palestine Refugees,” available at [<http://www.un.org/press/en/2008/ga10794.doc.htm>], 24 February, 2017.

⁷ See: “Azerbaijan’s Foreign Ministry: Azerbaijan Fully Supports the Efforts of the League of Arab States on Syria,” 31 January, 2012, available at [http://m.apa.az/xarici_siyaset/azerbaycan-xarici-isler-nazirliyi-azerbaycan-suriya-meselesinde-ereb-dovletleri-liqasinin-seylerini-tam-destekleyir], 25 February, 2017 (in Azerbaijani).

⁸ See: K. Guliyev, “Azerbaijan’s Activities in the U.N. Security Council in 2012,” 21 January, 2013, available at [<http://qafsam.org/page/402/az>], 25 February, 2017 (in Azerbaijani).

⁹ For detailed information on this resolution, please see: “Security Council Sixty-Seventh Year 6711th Meeting Saturday, 4 February, 2012, 10 a.m. New York”, available at [<http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF96CF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Syria%20SPV%206711.pdf>], 25 February, 2017.

¹⁰ For detailed information on this resolution, please see: “Security Council, Distr.: General 19 July 2012”, available at [<http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF96CF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Syria%20S2012%20538.pdf>], 25 February, 2017.

¹¹ See: K. Guliyev, *op. cit.*

In fact, since Azerbaijan is generally highly sensitive to internal conflicts and the external support of such conflicts, Baku took Turkey's policy into account and has tried to remain neutral to the civil war in Syria. From time to time, Azerbaijan has voiced its position regarding humanitarian issues by putting its support behind the non-use of force against the civilian population, and the need to provide all kinds of aid to the people of Syria and its refugees. This issue has been emphasized on several occasions by Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, as well as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other officials, deputies and intellectuals.¹²

In February 2016, however, Azerbaijan's Deputy Foreign Minister Araz Azimov gave a slightly different explanation of Azerbaijan's general foreign policy. In his statement, published in Austria's famous *Die Presse* on 15 February, 2016, Azimov said: "Bashar al-Assad as president is the only guarantee of Syria's sovereignty and security," stirring debate in Azerbaijan.¹³ On 17 February, 2016, the Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs made an official statement following the reactions to Azimov's statements. Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesman Hikmet Hajiyev stated that Azerbaijan's stance had already been expressed by President Ilham Aliyev, emphasizing that "the most important thing for Azerbaijan is to ensure peace and ceasefire in the region, and to support the political resolution of the crisis in the direction of the will of the Syrian people."¹⁴ Meanwhile, Azerbaijan was invited to join the coalition of Islamic countries that was brought together to intervene in Syria in recent years, yet Azerbaijan has not warmly welcomed the invitation.¹⁵

The biggest problem faced by Azerbaijan in the overall process has been the downing by Turkey of the Russian "Su-24" military aircraft involved in operations in Syria.¹⁶ The deterioration of Russia-Turkey relations made it difficult for the Azerbaijani government to determine its political stance. Although there was a lack of public consensus in Azerbaijan on whether to support the Turkey's or Russia's stance in Syria, Turkey's side outweighed significantly. That said, following the substantial resolution of the problem between the two countries, and in particular, with the convergence of their positions on Syria (like the statement of Turkey's former Foreign Minister Yaşar Yakaş says: "The cooperation with Russia brought Turkey one step closer to the Russian orbit") the pressure on Azerbaijan on this issue has decreased.¹⁷

Azerbaijan voiced support for Turkey's Operation Peace Spring in northern Syria in October 2019.¹⁸

The participation of Azerbaijani citizens in the civil war in Syria is considered to be a serious security risk by the Azerbaijani authorities, and many people who return to Azerbaijan after taking part in the war, including those who recruited others to fight in Syria, have been arrested.¹⁹

¹² See: "London Conference: Peace and Peace Challenges of Azerbaijani President," 12 February, 2016, available at [<http://newtimes.az/az/organisations/4201/>], 25 February, 2017 (in Azerbaijani).

¹³ See: "Tolerieren das nicht: Baku verlangt Entschuldigung von OSZE," 15 February, 2016, available at [http://diepresse.com/home/politik/aussenpolitik/4926415/Tolerieren-das-nicht_Baku-verlangt-Entschuldigung-von-OSZE], 25 February, 2017.

¹⁴ "The Foreign Ministry Voiced Objections to Araz Azimov's Statement on Assad," *Yeni Musavat*, 18 February, 2016 (in Azerbaijani).

¹⁵ See: Z. Shiriyev, "Azerbaijan and the Syrian Anti-Terror Coalition," 12 April, 2016, available at [<http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13349-azerbaijan-and-the-syrian-anti-terror-coalition.html>], 25 February, 2017.

¹⁶ See: D.G. Bdoyan, "Problemy Rossiysko-Turetskikh otnosheniy na sovremennom etape," *Vlast*, Vol. 25, Issue 8, 2017, p. 193.

¹⁷ See: Y. Yakaş, "Syria, Role of Russia," 12 December, 2017, available at [<http://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/syria-role-of-russia/>], 25 February, 2017.

¹⁸ See: "Azerbaijan Voices Support for Operation Peace Spring," 11 October, 2019, available at [<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/azerbaijan-voices-support-for-operation-peace-spring/1610244>].

¹⁹ See: E. Souleimanov, "Azerbaijanis Volunteer in Syria Conflict," *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 5 February, 2014, available at [<https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/12908-azerbaijanis-volunteer-in-syria-conflict.html>], 24 February, 2017.

Syrian Crisis and Armenia

When compared to Azerbaijan, Armenia has maintained a considerable distance from the Syrian crisis. The policies of Russia and the West related to the crisis, Turkey's Syria policy, and both the Armenians living in Syria and those that have left have all strongly influenced Armenia's perception of the Syrian crisis and its foreign policy. Some Armenian historians have brought up the ties between Armenia and Syria at the end of 7th century and the beginning of the 8th century, recalling the meeting between Caliph Al-Walid I and the Armenians.²⁰

As a second important factor, a number of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire were sent to Syria during World War I, with most of them settling in Aleppo and its environs.²¹ In fact, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, the first president of Armenia, was born in Aleppo (1945), but emigrated to the U.S.S.R. with his family in 1946.

Like Azerbaijan, Armenia also maintained ties with Syria in the Soviet era. On 6 March, 1992, within the framework of the visit of Armenia's former Foreign Minister Raffi Hovhannissian to Syria, an agreement was signed on the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries in Damascus, and immediately afterwards, Armenia's former President Levon Ter-Petrosyan visited Syria in March 1992.²² Furthermore, Armenia opened an embassy (in Damascus) and a consulate (in Aleppo) in Syria, where over 150,000 Armenians are living.²³

The embassy of Syria in Armenia was opened in 1997, and Syria's first high-level visit to Armenia was made by former Foreign Minister Faruk al-Shara in March 1992, while the most recent high-level visit to Armenia was made by Syrian President Bashar Assad in June 2009.²⁴

As already mentioned, the Russia-Armenia-Iran-Syria axis was considered to be anti-Western in the 1990s, and Armenian-Syrian relations at this time were generally positive. According to some Armenian experts, however, simultaneously with the rapprochement between Turkey and Syria in the early 2000s, Syrian-Armenian relations have gradually cooled.²⁵ Nevertheless, bilateral relations continued and Armenia even facilitated a visa regime for Syrian citizens in 2005, and supported Syria's proposal regarding "Syria's occupied Golan Heights" at the U.N. General Assembly.²⁶

Armenia refrained from voicing its position regarding the Syrian civil war in the early days, but as Bashar Assad began to regain power, the Armenian authorities started to talk to the Syrian authorities again and express their support for a united Syria (to a certain extent, meaning the Assad administration).²⁷

At the same time, Armenia was keeping a close eye on the situation of the Armenians living in Syria and tried to help those in a difficult predicament. The most important issue in Armenia's view

²⁰ See: A.N. Ter-Gevondyan, *Armenia i Arabskiy Khalifat*, The National Academy of Sciences of the Armenia S.S.R., Erevan, 1977, pp. 73, 78.

²¹ See: "Syria," Virtual Museum of the Armenian Diaspora, available at [<http://armdiasporamuseum.com/%D5%BD%D5%AB%D6%80%D5%AB%D5%A1-3/>], 26 February, 2017 (in Armenian).

²² See: "Bilateral Relations: Syrian Arab Republic," available at [<http://www.mfa.am/en/country-by-country/sy/>].

²³ See: N. Migliorino, *(Re)constructing Armenia in Lebanon and Syria: Ethno-cultural Diversity and the State in the Aftermath of a Refugee Crisis*, Berghahn Books, New York, 2008.

²⁴ See: "Bilateral Relations: Syrian Arab Republic."

²⁵ See: "Armenian-Syrian Relations Should Develop," 2 June, 2009, available at [<http://www.panarmenian.net/eng/news/32361/>], 26 February, 2017.

²⁶ "On Fourth Committee's Recommendation, General Assembly Adopts 26 Texts On Mines, Decolonization, Atomic Radiation, Israeli Practices, Among Other Topics"; "General Assembly Adopts Broad Range of Texts, 26 in All, On Recommendation of its Fourth Committee, Including On Decolonization, Information, Palestine Refugees."

²⁷ See: A. Ismail, "Armenian, Syrian Foreign Ministers Discuss Situation in War-Torn Country," 24 September, 2016, available at [<https://sputniknews.com/world/201609241045666214-armenia-syria-war/>], 26 February, 2017; "Armenian Ambassador Meets with Speaker of the Syria's Parliament," 21 June, 2017, available at [<https://armenianweekly.com/2017/06/21/armenian-ambassador-meets-with-speaker-of-the-syrias-parliament/>].

of the Syrian crisis was the displacement of the Armenian population from Syria.²⁸ According to the official figures of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, the number of refugees that had fled to Armenia to escape the war in Syria exceeded 17,000 by 2016,²⁹ although unofficial data indicates that this figure may exceed 20,000.³⁰ Many of the Armenians who left Syria settled in Armenia, and especially in the Armenia-occupied Azerbaijani territories.³¹ Naturally, Azerbaijan has criticized Armenia's "settlement policy" in its occupied territories, and has voiced its concerns in reports to international organizations.

The troubles experienced by Turkey as a result of the crisis, especially the rising tensions in its relations with Russia and Iran, have been seen as positive developments in the Armenian media.³² It was even presumed that Armenia would be involved in the Turkey-Russia tensions that emerged due to the Syrian crisis. It meant Russia could use its military bases in Armenia against Turkey; as Russia had increased military aid to Armenia recently.³³

Armenia condemns the invasion of Syria by the Turkish armed forces in October 2019.³⁴

Another interesting claim related to Syria's possible recognition of the so-called "Armenian genocide" in response to Turkey,³⁵ and a similar statement was given by the President of the Syrian Parliament Jihad al-Laham, who attended the so-called "genocide commemoration" ceremonies in Armenia in 2015.

Syrian Crisis and Georgia

Relations between Georgia and Syria have been more strained compared to other South Caucasus countries. Similarly, the consequences of the Syrian crisis for Georgia were also more severe.

Diplomatic relations between Georgia and Syria were established on 18 May, 1994³⁶, although neither country opened an embassy. Georgia accredited its Embassy in Egypt in 1997 to represent official Tbilisi in Syria, and likewise, the Syria's Embassy to Armenia has been mandated to manage the relations with Georgia since 1996.

Reciprocal visits between the two countries have also been limited. The last visit paid to Syria by a Georgian official was on 2 May, 2010, when Georgia's former Foreign Minister Grigol Vasadze

²⁸ See: A. Nigmatulia, "Syrian Refugees in Armenia: A Warm Welcome," 20 April, 2015, available at [<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2015/04/syrians-armenia-refugee-story-150412132753714.html>], 26 February, 2017.

²⁹ See: L. Atamian, H. Nahapetyan, "Armenia and the Syrian Refugee Crisis," 2 March, 2016 [<https://www.uidn1.org/single-post/2017/12/05/Armenia-and-the-Syrian-Refugee-Crisis>], 26 February, 2017.

³⁰ See: A. Babajanyan, "The Syrian Refugees Coming Home to Armenia," available at [<http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/20/the-syrian-refugees-coming-home-to-armenia-migration-syria/>], 26 February, 2017.

³¹ See: "Armenia: Syrian Refugees Resettling in Occupied Azerbaijani Territory," 28 January, 2013, available at [<http://www.eurasianet.org/node/66461>], 26 February, 2017; "Armenians Who Escaped from Syria to Erivan: As We Live Our Second Genocide," 14 April, 2015, available at [http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2015/04/150414_independent_erivan], 26 February, 2017.

³² See: "Russia Urges Closing Turkey Border to Bar Extremists' Flow to Syria," 15 April, 2016, available at [<http://www.panarmenian.net/eng/news/210317/>], 26 February, 2017; "Turkey Strikes on Syria 'absolute lawlessness'—Russia," 17 February, 2016, available at [<http://www.panarmenian.net/eng/news/206278/>], 26 February, 2017.

³³ See: G. Taylor, "Armenia pulled into Russia-Turkey clash in Syria," *The Washington Times*, 2 March, 2016.

³⁴ See: "Statement by the MFA of Armenia on the Military Invasion by Turkey in the North-Eastern Syria," available at [https://www.mfa.am/en/interviews-articles-and-comments/2019/10/10/mfa_statement_syria/9886], 10 October, 2019.

³⁵ See: "Syria Recognizes the Armenian Genocide Committed by the Ottoman Empire, Parliament Speaker says," 22 April, 2015, available at [<http://www.armradio.am/en/2015/04/22/syria-recognizes-the-armenian-genocide-committed-by-the-ottoman-empire-parliament-speaker-says/>], 26 February, 2017.

³⁶ See: "Relations between Georgia and the Syrian Arab Republic," 20 July, 2016, available at [http://embassy.mfa.gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=272&info_id=11798], 26 February, 2017.

met the Syrian President and other officials,³⁷ and the last high-level contact between the two countries was the meeting between Georgia's former Foreign Minister Grigol Vasadze and Syria's Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem in September 2010 at the U.N. General Assembly.

Like the two other South Caucasus countries, Georgia has also sided with Syria in the "Syria's occupied Golan Heights" issue, raised at the U.N. General Assembly.³⁸

Among the South Caucasus countries, Georgia is the least involved in the Syrian crisis, with the main concerns regarding the crisis in Georgia being the effect on its relations with the West and the troubles emerging in this context in its relations with Syria. Even before the onset of the Syrian crisis after the events of August 2008, Syria was among the few countries that fully supported Russia during the Russia-Georgia war.³⁹ Furthermore, Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad accused Georgia of provocation at the time and stated that Russia should respond to this provocation.

Later, there were claims that Syria planned to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the break-away Georgian territories occupied by Russia, as independent states, which raised tensions between the two countries.⁴⁰ The most recent high-level visits between Syria and Abkhazia have once again put a strain on Georgian-Syrian relations. On 16-22 August, 2017, a delegation from Abkhazia went to Syria to meet with senior officials, including Syrian Prime Minister Imad Khamis, Foreign Minister Walid Muallem, Economy Minister Samar al-Khalil and People's Assembly President Najdat Anzour. Then, on 27 September, 2017, a seven-strong Syrian delegation, including Parliament members, visited Abkhazia, spurring a harsh reaction from the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁴¹

After the escalation of the crisis in Syria, the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed concerns about deaths of civilians in an official statement (30 August, 2013) and emphasized the importance of human rights. The statement also called on the U.N. and the Arab League to work towards a solution to the crisis, appealing to all sides to support this endeavor.⁴²

Georgia refrained from voicing its position regarding the Syrian civil war. But, in October 2019 Georgian Foreign Minister declared: "We also recognize the interest of our strategic partner Turkey in ensuring a secure environment along its borders."⁴³

Another aspect of the Syrian crisis that concerns Georgia is the participation of Chechens living in Georgia in the civil war in Syria. They went to fight in the war and returned to Georgia from time to time, just as they used to do in the case of Azerbaijan. In this context, they constitute a security concern for Georgia,⁴⁴ with some of those who have been granted Georgian citizenship identified as having carried out bloody acts of terrorism in Turkey.

³⁷ See: "Georgia, Syria Discuss Bilateral Relations," 3 May, 2010, available at [<http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=22251>], 26 February, 2017.

³⁸ "On Fourth Committee's Recommendation, General Assembly Adopts 26 Texts On Mines, Decolonization, Atomic Radiation, Israeli Practices, Among Other Topics"; "General Assembly Adopts Broad Range of Texts, 26 in All, On Recommendation of its Fourth Committee, Including On Decolonization, Information, Palestine Refugees."

³⁹ See: "Angry over Libya, Russia Takes Hard Stance on Ally Syria," AFP, 29 April, 2011, available at [<http://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2011/04/29/foreign/angry-over-libya-russia-takes-hard-stance-on-ally-syria/>], 26 February, 2017.

⁴⁰ See: "Syria can Recognize Abkhazia's Independence," 21 December, 2015, available at [<http://tr.sputniknews.com/politika/20151221/1019782932/gurcistan-abhazya-cirikba-suriye.html>], 26 February, 2017.

⁴¹ See: "Georgia Protests Syrian Visit to Abkhazia," *Civil.Ge*, 5 October, 2017, available at [<http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=30493>].

⁴² See: "Comment of the Georgian Foreign Minister on the Developments in Syria," available at [http://turkey.mfa.gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=193&info_id=20350], 26 February, 2017.

⁴³ G. Menabde, "Turkish Military Operation in Syria Complicates Georgia's Foreign Policy," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* [<https://jamestown.org/program/turkish-military-operation-in-syria-complicates-georgias-foreign-policy/>], 23 October, 2019.

⁴⁴ See: "Georgia's Syria Problem," 16 November, 2015, available at [<http://www.balcanicaucaaso.org/eng/Areas/Georgia-Georgia-s-Syria-Problem-165635>], 26 February, 2017; "Chechen-born Georgian Citizen Killed in Syria," 12 April, 2016, available at [<http://georgiatoday.ge/news/3525/Chechen-born-Georgian-Citizen-Killed-in-Syria>], 26 February, 2017; A. Sikharulidze, M. Urushadze, "Islam v Gruzii i politika integratsii," *Puti k miru i bezopasnosti*, Issue 51, 2016, p. 73.

Russia, which has particularly troublesome relations with Georgia, has made claims that some radical groups in Syria are receiving support through Georgia, and the Russian media and some Russian academics have even claimed that there is evidence that Georgia has made use of chemical weapons during the civil war in Syria.⁴⁵

Georgia has not been affected much by the Syrian crisis in terms of refugees, although nearly 400 refugees from Syria and Iraq have been granted asylum in the country.⁴⁶ As is the case in most countries where Syrian refugees have been granted asylum, the acceptance of refugees in Georgia is considered a humanitarian issue, as well as a security risk.⁴⁷

Conclusion

When the general effects of the Syrian crisis on the countries of the South Caucasus and the role they play in the crisis is analyzed, it is apparent that they have little influence on the crisis due to their size and geographical location. In other words, the countries of the South Caucasus cannot be considered the determinants of the crisis, although they are compelled to protect themselves from the resulting risks and to take advantage of the opportunities that the crisis offers. The most important dimension of the crisis for the South Caucasus countries is the region's location. It is flanked by Russia, Turkey and Iran, which have been at the very "forefront" of the crisis since the very beginning, and have even come to the brink of war as a result. That said, as Turkey dramatically changed its position, the three regional countries started to act collectively, and have described themselves as "three guarantor countries" in the efforts to find a solution to the Syrian problem.⁴⁸ This has directly affected the countries of the South Caucasus, which live under the constant influence of these three regional forces.

In general, the Syrian crisis has affected the security of all South Caucasus countries, and their foreign policies and relations with other countries at different levels. Among them, Azerbaijan has been the most affected by the Syrian crisis, in that Azerbaijani nationals have gone to fight in Syria, while the country as a whole has faced difficulties in its foreign policies and security while trying to maintain a balance between three important neighbors—Turkey, Russia and Iran. In the period following the downing of a Turkish military jet in Syria, and similarly, the downing of a Russian military aircraft by Turkey, Azerbaijan's maneuverability in its foreign policy was further restricted. Azerbaijan has been linked closely to the Syrian crisis due to its non-permanent membership and its two-month presidency at the U.N. Security Council, but throughout all these processes, Baku has sought to act within the framework of a balanced foreign policy approach, and has to a great extent succeeded in its efforts.

Armenia and Georgia have been less affected by the Syrian crisis than Azerbaijan. Armenia has sought to benefit from Turkey's foreign policy problems arising from the Syrian crisis, and has tried to improve its relations with Russia while assessing the opportunities afforded by the turmoil (the difficulties in Turkey-Syria and Turkey-Russia relations) surrounding the crisis in order to gain support in its "genocide recognition" efforts.

⁴⁵ See: M.V. Tarasova, "Vneshnepoliticheskie vyzovy i ugrozy regionalnoy bezopasnosti na iuge Rossii," *Teoria i praktika sovremennoy nauki*, Vol. 1, Issue 5, 2015, p. 621.

⁴⁶ See: "Georgia May Host Syrian Refugees from EU," available at [<http://georgiatoday.ge/news/1900/Georgia-May-Host-Syrian-Refugees-from-EU>], 26 February, 2017.

⁴⁷ See: Z. Mchedlishvili, "Arab Refugees—To Georgia in Search of Security," 9 February, 2016, available at [<http://newcaucasus.com/in-english/7417-arab-refugees-to-georgia-in-search-of-security.html>], 26 February, 2017.

⁴⁸ See: "Lidery RF, Irana i Turtsii isklyuchili podryv edinstva Sirii sozdaniem zon deeskalatsii," 22 November, 2017, available at [<http://www.interfax.ru/world/588612>].

Syria's need for Russian support due to the crisis and Georgia's rapport with the West have worsened the already strained relationship between Syria and Georgia.