

## **Russia May Face Negative Experience of the Karabakh Problem in Syria** **ARVAK Center comment, 12.03.2025<sup>1</sup>**

On March 6, 2025, fierce fighting broke out in Syria between the “*remnants of Assad's army*”, including Alawite militia units, and the security forces of the new government in Damascus. According to official releases, the Syrian government forces, represented mainly by HTS brigades directly controlled by acting president Ahmed ash-Sharaa, quickly suppressed the “*armed rebellion*”. Meanwhile, various sources indicate that the so-called “*New Syrian Army*” has committed atrocities against the peaceful Alawite population in Latakia, Tartus, Jableh, and other areas with a dense population of this confessional group.

The data of the international media on the number of civilian casualties varies (from 500 to several thousand), but regardless of the reliability of these figures, the punitive actions of the “*New Syrian Army*” have the character of genocidal acts against representatives of a confessional minority. This is evidenced by numerous facts, including video material distributed online by the perpetrators themselves. The HTS punitive raids have prompted thousands of Alawites living in northwestern Syria to seek refuge in the wooded and mountainous areas of Latakia, in northern Lebanon, and also on the territory of the two Russian bases still remaining in Syria after the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad’s government.

Already on March 07, 2025, hundreds of Alawites from the vicinity of Latakia gathered with their families at the checkpoint of the Russian Aerospace Forces’ Khmeimim base with the request to be allowed to enter the territory guarded by Russian troops. According to media reports, after consultations with Moscow, the base command decided to provide them with temporary shelter, as well as food and water.

Despite its humanitarian nature, this measure cannot but affect the Moscow–Damascus relationship agenda, especially against the backdrop of the 3-month long negotiations about the future of the Russian military contingent in Syria. According to several Russian experts, the strategic bases in Syria (the Russian Navy base in Tartus and the Russian Aerospace Forces base in Khmeimim) were established primarily to strengthen the government of B. al-Assad and prevent direct military intervention by the Western coalition, as well as Turkish and Israeli forces in the intra-Syrian conflict. With the fall of B. al-Assad’s regime, the bases lost their original purpose, and the probability of their involvement in the intra-Syrian processes is currently almost impossible. Now Russia is trying to keep the bases in Tartus and Khmeimim only to ensure military logistics with the African continent, in a number of countries where Moscow is establishing a military presence and building political and economic relations.

It is obvious that in negotiations with Damascus, Moscow emphasizes precisely this circumstance and rejects any possibility of its using these bases to influence the internal political processes in the “*new Syria*”. This logic is supported by the fact that even before providing shelter to the Alawite families in Khmeimim, the Russian foreign ministry issued an urgent statement assuring Damascus of its non-participation in the latest events in Syria

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<sup>1</sup> The original (in Rus.) was posted on our website on 09.03.2025.

and its loyalty to the government of A. ash-Sharaa. The statement, in particular, noted: “*We confirm our principled position in support of the sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic. We expect that all states that have influence on the situation in Syria will contribute to its normalization. We are committed to close coordination of efforts with foreign partners in the interests of the speedy de-escalation of the situation*”.

In fact, the rhetoric of the Russian MFA signaled Moscow’s support for the official position of Damascus, echoing the statements of the ash-Sharaa government that the cause of the new bloodshed was the desire of the “*pro-Assad forces*” from among the Alawites to “*strike a revenge blow*” against the unity of “*new Syria*” and its sovereignty. Moscow even expressed its support for official Damascus, with the intention of not giving the latter any reason to interpret the protection of several hundred Alawites as anything other than a purely humanitarian action.

It is difficult to judge the initial position of the Russian foreign ministry on the issue of providing shelter to Alawite families fleeing extermination, but it can be assumed that the leadership of the Khmeimim base itself could have insisted on it. The Russian military, for objective reasons, is better informed about the situation “on the ground” and therefore more interested in preserving what remains of Russia’s image in Syria. This is in a situation where Syria’s Sunni majority, which supports A. ash-Sharaa and HTS, treats the Russians with marked contempt and hatred, while Alawites, Christians, Kurds, and other currently oppressed groups still retain hope that Russian military bases are a factor in partially deterring even larger-scale reprisals by Sunni Islamists. It is no coincidence that in the early days of the “*rebellion*”, rumors spread among the Alawites that the Russian Aerospace Forces in Syria were allegedly preparing to launch airstrikes against armored columns being sent from Aleppo and Damascus to support the government forces in Latakia. Against this background, the refusal to provide shelter to a group of citizens who gathered at the Khmeimim base would finally devalue Russia’s authority both in the eyes of Syrian minorities and, in fact, supporters of the government in Damascus, which would be very painful for the Russian military “on the ground”, who personified Russia’s power and glory in Syria from 2015 to 2024.

In this context, it is impossible to miss the parallels between the events in Syria in March and the situation that matured in the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic in September 2023. On September 19, 2023, thousands of Artsakh Armenians fleeing the ethnic cleansing carried out by Baku under the guise of an “*anti-terrorist operation*” also requested protection on the territory of the Russian base near the village of Ivanyan. Then the Russians also allowed civilians to enter the territory of the base, later facilitating their evacuation to Armenia. While the Russian peacekeeping contingent (RPC) in Nagorno-Karabakh was officially tasked with protecting civilians, the Russian military presence in Syria does not have the same legal mandate. Moreover, the legal grounds for their presence in Syria is not regulated at all at the moment, and the current government in Damascus will decide for itself whether the agreement on the Russian contingent, signed by Moscow with B. al-Assad, will be re-approved, adjusted, or completely canceled.

One way or another, in light of the latest clashes and massacres of Alawites by Damascus, Russia has once again found itself in a very difficult situation. Russian diplomacy is desperately trying to demonstrate its loyalty to the new Syrian authorities, hoping that the dialogue with them regarding the future of the bases in Hmeimim and Tartus will not be interrupted. On the other hand, the last thing the Russian military wants is to squander respect and significance in Syria. Balancing these factors is extremely difficult, given that official Moscow has not developed a strategic, rather than situational, approach to the Syrian case.

The negative experience of Nagorno-Karabakh suggests that situational behavior and the lack of deep understanding of one's own long-term interests and goals in such situations is fraught with *fiasco*. As a result of the actual surrender of Armenian interests in Artsakh, Moscow not only lost this region and squandered the resource of loyalty of Armenian socio-political circles, but also, as subsequent events has shown, was forced to withdraw its military contingent from Azerbaijan, and is now forced to accept the continuing degradation of allied relations with Azerbaijan. Russia's indecisive, vague and purely situational actions in Syria can also lead to another fall and the complete loss of any presence in this Middle Eastern country.