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Hungary-Syria relations: a brief history

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Hungary's relationship with the countries of the Middle East has been shaped chiefly by the East-Central European country's position in the world order. As Hungary is a post-Soviet country and was part of the Soviet bloc, Hungarian-Arab relations were characterised by Hungary's alignment with Moscow's official friendly policy towards the Middle Eastern Arab countries. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the change of the regime in 1989 in Hungary led to closer relations with the democratic Western world that manifested in the joining of NATO and the EU. These alliances' policies shaped many of Hungary's relations with the Arab countries in the Middle East, thus with Syria. The two nations' relations became closer after 2011 with the Hungarian government's support program for the persecuted Christians in the country and the region. After the migration wave 2015, Hungary emphasised the need for stability and peace in the region, and local help to avoid another migration wave to Europe. The fall of the Assad regime at the end of 2024 brought significant changes in the country that could escalate beyond the borders of the Middle Eastern state, and eventually to Europe as well. Therefore, this paper seeks to give an overview of the Hungarian-Syrian relationship and possible consequences of the fall of the Assad regime for it.

The Hungarian-Syrian relations in the Soviet era

The relationship between Hungary and Syria has changed over time. Dating back to the communist era, Hungary, part of the Soviet Bloc, needed to follow Moscow's direction. Following Stalin's death, the Middle East received more attention from the Kremlin; thus, the connections between Hungary and Middle Eastern countries restarted after 1953. Both countries established diplomatic relations in 1954, and a Syrian embassy was opened in Budapest in 1961.

During the Cold War, Hungary supported Syria through trade, educational exchanges, and military aid, aligning with broader Soviet objectives in the Middle East. However, Hungary faced challenges balancing its commitments to socialist principles with the pragmatic demands of state-level diplomacy in the region. It was also visible in the case of Syria. For example, in 1973, Hungary resisted recognising Syria's claim of "building socialism" in joint diplomatic statements, reflecting ideological disagreements. ¹

From the 1960s, the Middle East was a significant market for Hungarian exports. Hungary exported machinery, industrial goods, and weapons to the Middle East while importing raw materials and agricultural products like cotton. These trade relationships were vital due to Hungary's ongoing trade deficit and shortage of Western currency, making economic engagement with the region necessary. Syria belonged to the so-called "friendly" countries group of the Middle East in the eyes of the Soviet Union, and Hungary had good trade relations with it. From the military perspective, Hungary demonstrated its alignment with the Soviet Middle Eastern policies during the Cold War by supporting Syria in the 1973 Yom Kippur War with significant military support.

In the 1980s, Hungarian Arab relations started to change, from one side because of conflicts in the Middle East, like the Iranian Revolution and the

Iraq-Iran war, to the other because of Hungary's own economic difficulties, which led to the need for Western loans. The years before the regime change in Hungary saw the lessening of the intense economic relations with the Arab countries as Hungary became closer to the Western ones.

The change of the regime in Hungarian- Arab relations was a turning point as the ties changed with traditional partners like Algeria, the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, and Syria because Hungary restarted its diplomatic relations with Israel after the long break from 1967. ²

Hungarian-Syrian relations after the change of the regime in Hungary

The transition from a socialist to a democratic regime automatically meant the need for a closer relationship with the Western world, which caused Hungary to join NATO and the EU. These two intergovernmental organisations significantly impacted the Hungary-Syria and, in a broader context, the Hungary-Middle East relations in the following years.

Hungary, which achieved NATO membership in 1999, aligned with the Western world and the US by participating in the Iraqi War between 2003 and 2005. This was the first significant action related to the Middle East following the democratic transition in the Central European country. The Hungarian Parliament approved the deployment of the Hungarian Defence Forces' troops, approximately 300 soldiers, to Iraq in May 2003. ³ Their primary task was logistical and transportation support rather than direct combat.

The legitimacy of the Iraqi War and the Hungarian involvement in it were deeply questioned by the Hungarians. In April 2024, two-thirds of the Hungarians opposed the Hungarian government's decision to send transport units to Iraq. Viktor Orbán, the current Prime Minister and a member of the opposition at the time, considered the happenings in Iraq morally and humanly unacceptable and urged for the return of the

Hungarian soldiers. ⁴ The increasing unpopularity of the Iraqi mission led to a domestic vote in 2004 in Hungary following the change of government. As a result, Hungarian forces were withdrawn in 2005.

The civil war in Syria and the end of diplomatic relations

The turmoil of the Arab Spring, followed by the civil war in Syria, resulted in extreme violence for the Syrian people's demands for democratic reforms. In response to the human rights situation, the European Union ended all bilateral cooperation with the Syrian government and its supporters in May 2011. Furthermore, sanctions against targeting individuals and companies responsible for the Syrian people's human rights abuses were also adopted. Among them were ministers, military officials, scientists, businessmen and other members of the Syrian regime.

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Hungary, as a member state, adopted the EU standpoint towards the Assad regime in Syria. In 2012, the Hungarian government recognised the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces as the only legitimate representative of the Syrian people. As Hungary opposed the legitimacy of the Assad regime, the Syrian diplomats who represented it in Hungary were also considered illegitimate, meaning the end of the diplomatic relations between Hungary and Syria.⁶

Although diplomatic ties between the EU and Hungary with Syria were cut down in 2011, both countries have placed a great emphasis on humanitarian aid to the Syrian people. Since 2011, the EU and its regional partners have provided approximately 33 billion euros to Syrians in need.⁷

The Syrian Civil War is one of the major causes of the 2015 migration wave that affected Europe and, thus, Hungary. The Orbán government at that time was famous for its policies that were against the mainstream EU

approach to refugees or migrants coming from the Middle East and Africa. The government's official strategy has not changed since then. Instead of encouraging people to go to Europe, the EU should focus on eliminating the root causes and providing help so people can stay in their home countries.

Hungary, following the EU approach, provides help to the Syrian people in need, especially persecuted Christians. With the Hungary Helps Program, established by the Hungarian government in 2011, Hungary contributed 25 million euros to the humanitarian aid provided to Syrians. The program founded by Hungary has two main purposes. First, it encourages the international community to contribute to the region's stability. Second, it also calls on the international community to do everything possible to ensure the return of Syrian refugees and migrants to their homeland.⁸ Besides helping persecuted Christians in Syria, Hungary also supports countries in the Middle East that the refugee and migrant crisis threaten. Hungary also called on the EU to give more financial assistance to those countries, namely Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan, that are the most essential aim countries of the Syrian refugees. Ending the crisis in the Middle East and allowing people to return to their homes are the two significant elements of the Hungarian strategy in the Syrian conflict.⁹

2019 brought a minor change in the Hungarian-Syrian relationship with the appointment of a Hungarian diplomat who would visit Syria several times a year, monitor humanitarian aid, and perform other consular duties. This step by the Hungarian government was controversial at the time. Still, according to the statement of the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it was consistent with the practice of several EU member states.¹⁰

Possible future scenarios in the Hungarian-Syrian relationship

Following the fall of the Assad regime, Prime Minister Orbán reaffirmed Hungary's long-lasting commitment to advocating for peace and working for safe living conditions for persecuted Christians. ¹¹

Hungary followed the EU's central policies in Syria and will most likely continue with them. Before the regime's fall, these policies mainly involved ending the war with a genuine political transition, saving lives through humanitarian aid, and promoting democracy, human rights, and freedom of expression.¹² With the regime's fall, a potential change in the direction of a political transition occurred.

As it was mentioned earlier, the Syrian civil war played a significant role in the 2015 migrant crisis, and the collapse of the Assad regime holds the potential for a similar scenario.

According to the UN data, following the Syrian civil war that began in 2011, 14 million people have been displaced, and around 5,5 million Syrian refugees live in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt. In Europe, Germany is home to the largest Syrian refugee community, which counts more than 850,000 people. 90% of the population lives below the poverty line, and 70% of the population needs humanitarian assistance.¹³

Although the current situation holds the potential for a substantial migrant crisis again, people in Syria, after the fall of the Assad regime, did not leave their home country in large numbers. Besides the decision of the people living in Syria, the European countries also showed another behaviour that they followed in 2015. Several EU member countries suspended the processing of Syrian asylum applications. Among them was Germany, where the most significant Syrian community lives, and it would be a massive burden on the country to host more refugees. The European Union expected that the fall of the violent Assad regime would improve the situation in Syria and would not cause another refugee wave to Europe. ¹⁴ These expectations are not baseless since the leader of the

rebel groups stated that they would protect all the Syrian citizen and their property, including the Christian minority. There have been no reports of any atrocities related to the Christian minority, but there are a lot of concerns about the future.¹⁵

From Hungary's perspective, the Orbán government is more likely to follow its previous policies toward Syria. The Hungarian Helps Program would provide humanitarian help to the persecuted Christian communities and raise its voice in international forums to promote peace in the region, as the only solution to all the problems in the Middle East.

Conclusion

Hungary's relationship with Syria has undergone a significant transformation, shaped by Hungary's own evolution from a Soviet-aligned state to a member of NATO and the EU. While Soviet policies and pragmatic economic cooperation drove the Cold-War-era relations, the democratic transition in Hungary marked a pivot towards Western alliances, including the adaption of EU policies critical of the Assad regime during the Syrian Civil War. Despite the end of diplomatic relations in 2011, Hungary has actively contributed to humanitarian aid through initiatives like the Hungary Helps Program, underlining its commitment to supporting persecuted Christians and promoting regional stability.

The fall of the Assad regime in 2024 introduces a new chapter in Hungarian-Syrian relations, characterised by uncertainty and potential challenges. Hungary's approach will likely remain aligned with EU policies, emphasising humanitarian aid, the return of refugees, and efforts to prevent another migration crisis.

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