What Does the Future Hold for the Russian Language in Syria?

Back in the days of the Soviet Union, Russian-Syrian relations were quite cordial. Having established diplomatic contacts with Syria in 1944, the USSR became one of the main initiators of the country’s independence from France. Through the efforts of Soviet diplomats, Syria became a sovereign state in 1946. In 1980, representatives of the Syrian Arab Republic (SAR) and the Soviet Union signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation. The USSR supported Syria in matters of foreign policy and was also the main supplier of weapons to the Syrian army. Dozens of films were made by filmmakers of the two countries working together. Tens of thousands of Syrian students were educated in Soviet universities.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, ties between Russia and Syria weakened considerably. Trade declined sharply, joint cultural projects had to be suspended, and some Syrian students who had studied at Russian universities were forced to return home. Military cooperation also weakened as Russia cut back on defense spending in the 1990s. Syria’s growing alienation from Russia has had a detrimental effect on its development: it has lost its main geopolitical ally in the region.

Since the early 2000s, Russia gradually began to restore its former influence in the international arena. Every year, cooperation between the Russian Federation and Syria in all key areas has grown rapidly and steadily. The entry of Russian troops into the Syrian Arab Republic in 2015 finally reestablished Russia as Syria’s main partner. Russian
military specialists made a decisive contribution to the defeat of the terrorist organization DAESH (banned in Russia) by their competent actions.

During the French Mandate in Syria, which lasted from 1920 to 1946, French became the second most important language in the country after Arabic. For a long time, French was taught in Syrian schools along with English. This is largely due to the fact that during the French military presence in Syria, the basic institutions of statehood were formed, and all the key positions in the country were held by the French. Most elements of Syrian government and military traditions are borrowed from France.

As Russia’s influence in Syria grew, the Russian language became increasingly popular in the country. The SAR is gradually recovering from the aftermath of violent civil war, and so the interaction between Russia and Syria is markedly expanding. Today there are a large number of Russian citizens on the territory of the SAR who interact with Syrians. The language barrier considerably hinders the process of rapprochement between the two countries, so in recent years, the Syrian government has embarked on a course of introducing the Russian language to the masses.

In 2017, Syrian Ambassador to Russia Riyad Haddad reported that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad had granted Russian the status of a second national language, thus underscoring the importance of building a bilateral dialogue between Russia and Syria. According to a Syrian diplomat, Bashar al-Assad decided to make Russian the second most important language in the state, in order, first of all, to show respect to Russia for its help in difficult times, thanks to which the official and legitimate government managed to withstand the onslaught of radical Islamists. It is important to note that some Syrian families express their gratitude to Russia by naming their sons Putin after the current Russian president, along with other various Russian names. The ambassador also reported that Bashar al-Assad had ordered the allocation of a plot of land near Damascus for the construction of a Russian school free of charge.

It is interesting to note that 10% of the population of Syria are Christians, many of whom start families with Russian-speaking wives from Russia, and raise their children in a multilingual and multicultural environment. It is in Syria, incidentally, where the most important Christian shrines in the world are located.

As a result of the de-escalation of the Syrian conflict, the country is gradually returning to its pre-war way of life. In 2020, the Russian Center of Science and Culture was opened in Damascus. According to the director of the center, locals have long appealed to Russian representatives to organize Russian language courses. The number of students in Syrian schools who have decided to study Russian as a second foreign language currently stands at over 20,000. This is a particularly high figure for a country with a population of about 17 million people. The center’s director noted that his organization provides all kinds of assistance to the Syrian part in training teaching staff for Syrian schools. According to analysts, in the foreseeable future new Russian scientific and cultural centers will appear in Syria, because cooperation between the two countries in the humanitarian sphere is strengthening every year. Many Syrian entrepreneurs are eager to learn Russian in order to facilitate interaction with their Russian counterparts. There are also an impressive number of Syrians who want to learn more about Russian culture for their general education.

Unfortunately, as of 2021, Syria does not have enough specialists with knowledge of the Russian language to teach it to everyone who wants to learn it. However, the Syrian authorities are taking measures to eliminate the problem. In 2014, Damascus University established a Russian language department that trains Russian language teachers for Syrian schools. Graduates of this department now work in educational institutions, teaching the Russian language to students in Syrian schools. The issue of the small number of educational programs remains rather acute. Russian and Syrian educators are working together to solve this dilemma.

Reports of yet another terrorist attack in Syria are becoming more and more scarce in the media. Consequently, one can presume that the situation in the country is becoming less dire with each passing day. If the situation in the country finally stabilizes, economic and humanitarian relations between Russia and the SAR will become much stronger. If this happens, the demand for learning Russian will increase even more.

In the long term, Syria could become a bulwark for the further assertion of the Russian language in the Middle East. If Syrian specialists in various fields who know Russian interact with their colleagues from other Arab countries, sooner or later there may be a demand to learn Russian in other countries as well. In such a scenario, Russia’s influence in the Middle East region will increase substantially, which will lead to an increase in Russia’s importance in matters relating to global geopolitics.
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