



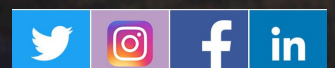
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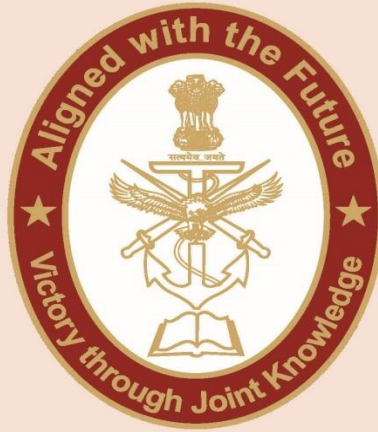
# POST-ASSAD SYRIA: IMPLICATIONS ON REGIONAL SECURITY AND INDIA'S INTERESTS

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### **POST-ASSAD SYRIA: IMPLICATIONS ON REGIONAL SECURITY AND INDIA'S INTERESTS**



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Even as the world was struggling to deal with ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and in the Gaza Strip, rebel groups in Syria led by the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS; Levant Liberation Union) under the leadership of Ahmed al-Sharaa, also known as Abu Mohammed al-Jolani launched a lightning fast offensive launched from its base in the Northwestern city of Idlib<sup>i</sup>. The fall of the Assad regime was brought about by several factors: a decaying and increasingly corrupt security apparatus, a worsening economic situation even in areas under regime control and most importantly, the fact that his biggest backers in Moscow and Tehran were distracted and weakened by conflicts of their own. While the discussions around the reasons behind Assad's fall will go on, the implications of these developments will have an impact on regional security in the Middle East and Indian security and economic interests both globally and in the immediate neighbourhood.

### **Background**

When the Syrian civil war broke out in 2011, many expected the conflict to go the way of other Arab Spring uprisings across the Middle East with the fall of the Assad government. Opposition forces such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA) received material

and diplomatic support from Western states and Turkey as well as from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) while the Government forces were backed by Iran and Russia.<sup>ii</sup> The Syrian Arab Army (SAA), the regular army of the Syrian government, faced reversals on all fronts at the hands of rebel forces and an increasingly precarious situation with the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) which spread terror throughout Syria and neighbouring Iraq. The entry of Russian air power into the conflict in 2015<sup>iii</sup> turned the tide of the conflict and rebel forces were eventually pushed back to their stronghold of Idlib in northwestern Syria. The most recent HTS-led rebel offensive which finally toppled the Assad government will come as a blow to Russian and Iranian interests and can be seen as a success for Turkey which may now have greater freedom to target Kurdish-led forces on its border with Syria and poses uncertainty for Israel. For its part, India has repeatedly stressed the importance of an “inclusive Syrian-led political process” to resolve the conflict through non-military means, a call that the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) repeated in a statement on the 9th of November<sup>iv</sup>. India’s insistence on the resolution of the conflict through an inclusive Syrian-led process was viewed positively by the Assad government and India’s traditionally pro- Syrian stance on the status of the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights was also received well by Damascus. While India was by no means aligned with or a staunch backer of the Assad government, his ouster will present a number of challenges for India’s regional and global interests.

### **Economic Implications**

The biggest direct impacts of Assad’s ouster on India’s economic interests are likely to be seen in the following areas; India’s interests in the region such as the India– Middle East–Europe Corridor’ (IMEC), India’s energy and shipping security and risks to the sizeable Indian diaspora in the Middle East. Announced at the New Delhi-hosted G20 summit in September 2023, the IMEC is seen by many as a US-led counter to China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)<sup>v</sup>. The project seeks to connect India to Europe through a number of port and other connectivity projects through the Middle East. For India, it presents an opportunity to boost its exports and expand its footprint in the Middle East, a crucial region for India’s energy security and trade interests. The outbreak of the war in Gaza in October 2023 came as a setback to the project as old animosities between the Arab states and Israel were once again brought to the front. The project has since essentially been put in cold storage. The coming of what are likely to be very pro-

Palestinian groups to power in Damascus will only further complicate this situation. While Assad was by no means an ally of Israel, Syria acted more as a transit corridor for Iranian proxies while his own assets were aimed at opposition forces. With these assets now in rebel hands, the conflict will only become more unpredictable, making the Israeli-Saudi normalisation necessary for the IMEC to succeed even more unlikely at least in the short to medium term. While India has done well to diversify its energy import sources to ensure energy security, increased instability in the Middle East is likely to cause an increase in energy import and shipping costs through the region. Finally, there exists a sizeable Indian diaspora in the Middle East totalling almost 8.88 million people, over 66 per cent of the total number of Non-resident Indians (NRIs) according to the MEA's data. Increased regional instability is likely to impact this population's ability to work in the region without fear and continue to send remittances back home.

### **Security Implications**

While Syria's neighbours will each have unique security challenges and situations that arise due to the opposition victory, India's distance does not necessarily mean it will not be affected. While India is not as deeply involved in the conflict as Turkey, Russia, or Israel are, the HTS's past will undoubtedly be a major cause of concern. The group was previously known as 'Jabhat al-Nusra' or 'al-Nusra Front' and was a major part of the anti-Assad camp since fighting in the conflict began and had pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda in 2013<sup>vi</sup>. The former leader of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, was also involved in the formation of the al-Nusra front. While the HTS leader al-Jolani publicly broke with the al-Nusra front in 2017 and has presented a moderate and inclusive image so far, concerns over the groups extremist roots and human rights abuses remain. The HTS has also been involved in conflict with various other rebel groups and its leading role in the fight against Assad does not necessarily grant them the legitimacy to overcome the deep divisions that exist in Syria.

Beyond the concerns around the HTS's own extremist roots, the absence of a widely accepted national government could also present other Islamist groups such as ISIS the chance to strengthen their own hand. The leader of the Kurdish-led and US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) Mazloum Abdi has warned that ISIS now has greater freedom of movement within the desert regions of Syria where they are not in direct

conflict with the rebel groups<sup>vii</sup>. The collapse of the SAA and other state security forces also means that detention facilities which hold ISIS fighters will now be vulnerable to attacks from the terror group. A resurgence of ISIS in Syria will give it the required funding and resources to once again spread its terror beyond the region and potentially launch attacks in India directly. The group's branch in South Asia, the ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K) has previously launched attacks as far away as Sri Lanka and while its ground presence is presently restricted to Afghanistan, the threat cannot be ignored.

The fall of Assad also does not necessarily mean the end of fighting or foreign involvement in Syria. Israeli forces have already conducted a major air offensive targeting Syrian military assets across the country to prevent them from being used in any scenario against Israel.<sup>viii</sup> Israel has also crossed into the part of the Golan Heights which served as a buffer zone since the end of the Yom Kippur war in 1974. It has argued that the 1974 agreement has collapsed following the fall of the Assad government<sup>ix</sup>. Along the northern border with Turkey, SDF forces have already clashed with the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) as Turkey seeks to expand its offensive against the Kurds. There is also the question of how Russia and Iran will react to these developments and how they will seek to preserve their own interests in the country.

### **India's Future Course of Action**

India's foremost concern should be to ensure that Syria is not used as a base of operations by extremist groups to threaten global security. The ongoing conflict in Gaza has shown that distant conflicts have the potential to impact Indian interests even if one takes geographical distance into account. To this end, India must cooperate with the new administration and provide humanitarian and reconstruction assistance as it did in the aftermath of the earthquake in early 2023. As an increasingly important global power, ensuring that the reconstruction efforts in Syria are not hijacked by other states to further their own agenda should also be a priority for India as that might slow down reconstruction and reconciliation efforts, further allowing the rise of extremist elements. Working with partners and multilateral organisations on this should thus be a main area of focus for India, alongside working with the broader international community to ensure that the situation does not become a 'Libya 2.0' where foreign powers with competing interests make a permanent solution next to impossible. This

means persuading Israel to roll back its deployments into the Golan Heights and return to the 1974 agreement.

India must also expand its regional cooperation and partnerships with regional players like Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States to ensure that India's economic interests are not harmed and that Indians working in the region are safe in the event of wider instability in the Middle East. The likelihood of a complete US withdrawal from the region under incoming President Donald Trump can also not be discounted, and India must be prepared to secure its interests in a region which may witness the rise of new actors, increase in the influence of existing players like Turkey and the rise of new regional rivalries.

On IMEC, India's priority must be to ensure that the project is not permanently put into cold storage or shot down. Work on the European, Indian and even the Saudi sections of the project must continue even as an end to the conflict in Gaza remains elusive. In the long term, India must prioritise its own interests in the region and work with like-minded partners to push for a ceasefire so that reconstruction may begin. IMEC's future will hinge greatly on how effectively regional peace and stability are managed, and India's priority must be to ensure that a post-Assad Syria acts as a stabilising force and non-state or even factions within the new Syrian administration don't use it as a base for attacks on the project. On the diplomatic front, the fallout of the conflict in Gaza is also likely to impact the future of the project. The Arab states might not be willing to work as extensively with Israel, fearful of a public backlash in the absence of an advancement of the peace process and a roadmap for Palestinian statehood. India has always supported a negotiated two-state solution for the Israel-Palestine conflict, and the government reiterated this stance in the Indian Parliament.<sup>x</sup> India's traditionally strong ties with the Arab states and its strong contemporary ties to Israel put it in a unique position to act as a peace broker, especially with the trust deficit faced by traditional 'great' powers like Russia and the larger West. This status must be leveraged to bring both sides to a long-term solution which guarantees regional stability and guarantees the security of Indian interests and assets like the IMEC in the region.

Finally, closer to home, India must work with neighbouring states to ensure that extremist elements at home are not able to use the instability in Syria to build connections with global terror networks and groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda. This will require cooperation between security and intelligence agencies of its neighbours like

Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal. To ensure the safety of global shipping into and out of the Indian Ocean, the Indian Navy should be brought into play to fill any security vacuum and to demonstrate India's role as a 'Net Security Provider' in the region. The actions of the Indian Navy to fill this role following Houthi attacks and an uptick in piracy in the Western Indian Ocean provides an excellent template and an example of Indian capacity to act as a regional security provider.<sup>xi</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The lightning fall of Bashar al-Assad has thrust Syria into a period of increasing uncertainty. Just a few weeks ago, his regime seemed secure, and opposition forces seemed to be resigned to defeat in their northwestern stronghold of Idlib. The speed of the HTS offensive has taken many by shock and provides little on how the new administration will act on the international stage. The deep divisions which persist mean that Syria will likely continue to be a polarised country with opposing groups and their foreign backers continuing to compete for influence and power unless a legitimate administration is put in place quickly. This power vacuum might provide extremist groups with an opportunity to stage some level of a comeback, presenting each actor with a unique yet common security challenge. In such an uncertain environment, India must act to secure its national interests and ensure the security of its citizens in the region. The situation also presents India the opportunity to present itself as an increasingly confident and responsible global power by mobilising international support for the upcoming reconstruction efforts while playing a role in securing its immediate neighbourhood against extremist threats.

## **DISCLAIMER**

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## **Endnotes**

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