PLUTUS IAS

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SYRIA'S INSTABILITY: STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

WHY IN THE NEWS?

In a pivotal moment for the Middle East, Islamist rebels in Syria declared the ouster of President Bashar al-Assad on Sunday after capturing Damascus, forcing him to flee and ending his family's decades-long rule following over 13 years of civil war.

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

1. Background and Origins

Assad Rule (1970–2011): Hafez al-Assad came to power in 1970, establishing an authoritarian regime built on Alawite minority support and a "shadow state" reliant on military and security networks. Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father in 2000, initially promising reforms. However, economic mismanagement, growing inequality, and political repression led to public dissatisfaction.

Arab Spring Catalyst (2011): Inspired by uprisings across the Arab world, peaceful protests began in Daraa demanding political reforms. The regime's violent response escalated unrest, transforming the protests into a nationwide uprising.

2. Civil War Begins (2012–2014)

Proliferation of Armed Groups: Initial peaceful protests gave way to armed resistance as the regime intensified crackdowns. Rebel factions like the Free Syrian Army (FSA) emerged, challenging Assad's forces across the country.

Sectarian Dimensions: Assad leveraged sectarian divisions, portraying himself as a protector of minorities against Sunni-dominated rebels. Iran and Hezbollah supported Assad, while Sunni-majority states like Saudi Arabia and Turkey-backed opposition groups.

3. Rise of Extremism (2014–2017)

Islamic State (ISIS): ISIS capitalized on the chaos, seizing significant territories in Syria and Iraq, including Raqqa, which became its de facto capital. A U.S.-led coalition intervened to combat ISIS, adding another layer of complexity to the conflict.

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS): Formerly linked to al-Qaida, HTS became a dominant rebel group in northern Syria, particularly in Idlib province.

4. Internationalization of the War (2015–2020)

Russian Intervention: Russia entered the conflict in 2015, providing air support to Assad, reversing rebel gains, and helping the regime regain key territories like Aleppo.

Proxy War Dynamics: The conflict became a battleground for global powers, with Iran, Turkey, the U.S., and Gulf states backing different factions.

5. Stalemate and Resurgence of Violence (2020–2024)

Ceasefires and Fragile Stability: Temporary ceasefires allowed for limited reconstruction and return of displaced civilians. However, tensions remained high, with occasional flare-ups between regime forces, rebels, and foreign actors.

HTS Offensive (2024): Rebel forces, led by HTS, launched an unprecedented offensive, breaching Damascus and forcing Bashar al-Assad to flee. This marked the end of over 50 years of Assad family rule, leaving Syria in an uncertain and fragmented state.

INDIA-SYRIA BILATERAL RELATIONS OVER THE YEARS

Historical and Civilizational Ties:

Historical ties: Both nations share a long history of friendly relations, rooted in civilizational links and shared values like secularism, nationalism, and developmental aspirations.

Arab cause: India has consistently supported Arab causes, including the Palestinian issue and Syria's claim to the Golan Heights.

Economic and Developmental Engagements:

Line of Credit (LoC): India extended a $240 million LoC in 2009 to finance 52% of the Tishreen Thermal Power Plant Extension project.

Steel Plant Modernization: A $25 million LoC facilitated the modernization of the Hama Iron & Steel Plant, completed in 2017 by Apollo International Limited.

Oil Sector Investments: ONGC Videsh Limited (OVL) invested $350 million in Syria's oil sector, with partnerships in Block-24 and Al Furat Petroleum Company. Activities have been suspended since 2012 due to security issues.

Capacity Building and Education

Scholarships: India offers 25 ICCR scholarships annually to Syrian students for higher education.

Training Programs: Through the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program, 90 professional training slots are provided each year.

'Study in India' Program: Since 2017-18, 1,500 seats have been offered to Syrian students, emphasizing technical and managerial training.

Strategic Importance

Regional balance: Strengthening ties with Syria enhances India's West Asia policy, complementing strong relations with GCC nations and Iran.

Counter Terrorism: Syria's counter-terrorism initiatives have helped India in combating radicalization and extremist ideologies affecting South Asia.

POST-CIVIL WAR RELATIONS (2011 ONWARDS)

Principled Stand: India called for a non-military, inclusive Syrian-led political process, adhering to UNSC Resolution 2254. Despite the conflict, India maintained its embassy in Damascus and emphasized Syria's sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity.

Humanitarian Assistance: India provided critical aid during Syria's 2023 earthquake under Operation Dost, sending relief material and supplies.

Renewed Engagement: The 2022 visit by India's Minister of State for External Affairs, V. Muraleedharan, marked a renewed push to deepen bilateral ties post-Arab Spring. In November 2023, India appointed Irshad Ahmad as the new Ambassador to Syria, reflecting a commitment to strengthening diplomatic ties.

Developmental Cooperation: India continues to explore avenues for collaboration in education, capacity building, and developmental partnerships, even amidst Syria's challenges.

IMPACTS OF ASSAD'S OUSTER ON INDIA'S INTERESTS IN WEST ASIA

Strategic Disruption: The collapse of the Assad regime breaks the "Shiite Crescent," diminishing Iran's influence across Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. This geopolitical shift could embolden hostile forces, affecting India's strategic ties and interests in the region.

Increased Regional Instability: The possibility of civil war in Syria involving groups like Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), Kurdish militias, and Assad's remnants raises security concerns. Such instability could destabilize India's partnerships in West Asia and pose indirect threats.

Rise in Terrorism and Radicalization: Syria risks becoming a breeding ground for jihadist activities, similar to Afghanistan. This could lead to increased organized crime, drug trafficking, and arms smuggling. Indian youth could face radicalization risks, boosting extremist elements within India and undermining domestic security.

Threats from Hostile Intelligence Agencies: The involvement of Turkish and Pakistani intelligence agencies in Syria could be detrimental to India. These agencies may exploit the situation to radicalize Indian youth, enhance terrorist networks, and destabilize India's national security.

Jeopardy to Economic Projects: Instability in Syria threatens the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEEC), a crucial trade and connectivity initiative. Lawlessness in Syria could obstruct transport routes and discourage investments linked to the corridor.

Humanitarian and Migratory Concerns: The worsening humanitarian crisis may trigger mass migrations, affecting regional stability and complicating international aid efforts, which could indirectly strain India's diplomatic relations with affected countries.

INDIA'S APPROACH TO THE NEW NORMALCY IN SYRIA

1. Wait and Watch: India is taking a cautious stance, observing developments in Syria before making significant policy shifts. This strategy allows India to assess the stability of the new government and the broader geopolitical landscape, ensuring that any actions taken are informed by current realities on the ground.

2. Dialogue with Regional Players: Engaging in dialogue with neighboring countries and regional powers is crucial for India. This dialogue can facilitate collaborative efforts toward stability and peace.

3. Engagement with All Parties Involved in the New Government of Syria: India aims to maintain relations with all factions within Syria's new government structure. This inclusive approach ensures that India remains relevant in discussions about Syria's future while promoting a political solution that reflects the diverse interests of its population.

4. High Alert on Security Measures to Avoid Internal Disturbances: Given the potential for unrest within Syria, India emphasizes heightened security measures to protect its nationals and interests in the region.

5. Active Dialogue for Quick Resolution and Normalcy in Syria: India can advocate for diplomatic solutions to expedite peace processes in Syria. By participating in international forums and supporting initiatives aimed at conflict resolution, India seeks to contribute positively to restoring normalcy.

6. Securing Indian Nationals in Syria: The safety of Indian citizens residing or working in Syria is a top priority for India's foreign policy. The government has established protocols for evacuation if necessary and maintains communication channels with Indian nationals to assist when needed.

7. Protecting Energy Security Through Engagement: Energy security is vital for India's economic interests; thus India can Collaborate on energy projects or investments can help secure India's energy needs while contributing to rebuilding efforts in Syria.

8. Humanitarian Assistance Initiatives: India could enhance its role by providing humanitarian aid to those affected by the conflict in Syria. This assistance could include food supplies, medical aid, and support for rebuilding infrastructure, thereby improving India's image as a responsible global actor committed to humanitarian principles.

CONCLUSION

The ouster of Assad heralds significant geopolitical shifts, posing challenges to regional stability and India's strategic interests. Careful diplomacy, proactive security measures, and sustained partnerships in West Asia are vital for India to navigate these evolving dynamics.

PRELIMS QUESTIONS:

Q. Consider the following countries:

1. Lebanon
2. Israel
3. Turkiye
4. Jordan
5. Iran
6. Iraq
7. Saudi Arabia

How many of the given above countries share a land border with Syria?

A. Only two
B. Only three
C. Only four
D. Only five

ANSWER: D

MAINS QUESTIONS:

Q. What are the potential security challenges India might face due to the ongoing instability in Syria? Discuss the measures India should adopt.
(Answer in 150 words)

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