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# OPINION

## Fall of Bashar Al-Assad: What it Means for the Region and India

Mohmad Waseem Malla\*

### Abstract

*The fall of Bashar al-Assad's government marks a significant turning point in the Western Asia region. Assad was overthrown by a quick onslaught by opposition troops commanded by Ahmad al-Sharaa, also known as Abu Mohammed al-Julani, following more about 13 years of civil war and international sanctions. The power vacuum in Damascus could lead to further fragmentation as different organizations, such as Islamist terrorists, Kurdish forces, and rebel groups, compete for control. It could potentially lead to prolonged instability and conflict if there is no consensus among these groups about what kind of future they envision for Syrian in the coming days. The fate of such significant change in the region brought about by the overthrow of Assad's regime will also depend on how well local, regional, and international actors handle the complications that will follow.*



If there is one aphorism, albeit overused, that distils the essence of West Asia singularly, it would undoubtedly be that the only constant about the region is its

inherent unpredictability. No recent occurrence underscores this axiom more profoundly than the seismic developments in Syria in the last two weeks, which resulted in the end of over five-decade-long rule of the Assad family over the country at the

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hands of opposition militants led by the Islamist group, Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) or Organization for the Liberation of the Levant. All it took were 12 days of military operation to end the 53-year rule of the Assad family. The cascade of events, both abrupt and unforeseen, confounded not only regional stakeholders and global powers but also experts and the general populace alike. This consequential moment is likely to have profound and enduring ramifications, reshaping the geopolitical calculus and recalibrating the intricate power equilibrium within the region and beyond. This event is being seen as at par with the removal of Saddam Hussein in 2003 following the US invasion of Iraq as part of its War on Terror, which fundamentally transformed the region's power dynamics.

### **Fall of Bashar al-Assad**

On 8 December 2024, Syria and the world woke to the extraordinary sight of Syrian State Television broadcasting a group of HTS fighters declaring that "The city of Damascus has been liberated. The tyrant Bashar al-Assad has been toppled," which marked the dramatic denouement of Bashar Al-Assad's 24-year rule.<sup>1</sup> Shortly after that, Ahmad Hussein Al Shurra, better known by his nom de guerre Abu Mohammad Al-Julani, the leader of HTS, appeared in the

historic Umayyad Mosque, an iconic 8th-century landmark in Damascus, proclaiming that this "victory is for all Syrians."<sup>2</sup>

These lightning-fast developments commenced on 27 November, when a coalition of armed opposition factions—spearheaded by HTS and including, among others, the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA)—initiated coordinated attacks, dubbed *Operation Deterrence of Aggression*, from their stronghold in Syria's northwestern Idlib Governorate. The activities of these groups involved in the operation against the government forces were coordinated through a joint *Military Control Room* at the Fateh al-Mubin operations centre in Idlib.<sup>3</sup> Targeting the neighbouring Aleppo Governorate, the country's second-largest city, the opposition fighters launched an assault that, to the astonishment of many, encountered minimal resistance from Assad's state forces. Within a mere three days, the rebel forces successfully seized control of Aleppo, triggering a cascading domino effect across Syria. It may be recalled that Assad's forces had retaken Aleppo after years of brutal fighting in 2016 from the rebel hands.

City after city fell into the hands of opposition forces with unprecedented swiftness. By 5 December, Hama,

Syria's fourth-largest city, had capitulated, swiftly followed by Homs, the gateway central city to the capital Damascus. In the early hours of 8 December, the rapidly advancing fighters overran the Syrian capital, effectively marking the end of the Assad family's 53-year hegemony over the country and heralding a new, albeit uncertain, chapter in its tumultuous history. For many, this symbolises the culmination of the Arab Uprisings of 2011, when Syrians initially rose in defiance of Bashar al-Assad's authoritarian regime. Assad government's brutal suppression of the protests swiftly escalated the movement into a protracted and devastating civil war, reshaping the socio-political fabric of the nation, leaving millions of Syrian homeless and leading to one the largest refugee crises.

The opposition forces have officially assumed control of Syria's governance. On 10 December, Bashar al-Assad's Prime Minister, Mohammed Jalali, and Vice President, Faisal Mekdad, formally transferred power to Mohammed al-Bashir, the nominee of HTS leader Abu Mohammad al-Julani. Al-Bashir served as the prime minister of the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG), an administrative entity established to govern the Idlib Governorate in 2017. He took up this role in January 2024, thereby positioning him as a

key figure in the opposition's transition to power.<sup>4</sup>

While the initial transition of power appears to have been conducted peacefully, it is too early to speculate how the situation will evolve in the country. It should be noted that HTS is not the only claimant to power in Damascus. Not only does it face competition from SNA, but also from the local militias from Syria's south, operating under Southern Operations Room and consisting of opposition fighters from Daraa, Suwayda and Quneitra provinces, along with minority Druze fighters, ostensibly backed by Jordan. These groups also battled Assad forces parallelly to consolidate their hold over areas south of the capital and were the first rebel groups to reach Damascus. Besides, Syria's Kurdish factions, led by Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), despite battling SNA's Turkish-motivated military campaign in Manbij, Raqqa and Deir Ezzor, would not cede their share in the evolving power dynamics.

Moreover, the rise of Salafi Islamist groups is seen with scepticism and concerns that these parties would push the largely secular Syria into a deeply conservative mode, akin to what the Afghan Taliban are doing in Afghanistan after overtaking the country in August 2021. This could result in their disregard for the rights

of different sections of society, including women, along with ethnic, religious and sectarian minorities. This stems from Al-Julani's past association with the Islamic State and Al Qaeda, even as he rebranded himself and his group as a religious nationalist one in recent years.

### **What Explains Assad Government's Rapid Fall**

#### ***Flashback***

Authoritarian governance was a hallmark of Bashar al-Assad's dictatorship in Syria, which placed a high priority on retaining power through a mix of military control, political repression, and strategic partnerships with both domestic and foreign nations like Russia and Iran. He had inherited a dictatorial system from his father Hafez al-Assad who came to power in November 1970 through a coup. Before the Assad family came to power, Syria experienced a period of political instability marked by multiple coups and changes in government.

After gaining independence from France in 1946, Syria went through a series of military coups and short-lived governments. In 1963, a group of military officers including Hafez al-Assad owing allegiance to the Baath Party of Syria organised a coup and assumed power. Although the Baath Party (the word *Baath* in Arabic

meaning resurrection) emphasising on the ideas of Arab nationalism, pan-Arabism, Arab socialism, and anti-imperialism with its motto, "Unity, Liberty, Socialism", was originally founded by intellectuals and political activists, it gained sympathy within the Syrian military and after the coup of 1963, the party was dominated by the military. In 1966, after the old guard of the Baath party was thrown out in another coup, an Alawaite (a Shia minority sect accounting for about 10-13% of the Syrian population) named Salah Jadid controlled the reins of the government and since then the Alawaites dominated the power architecture in Syria. In November 1970, Hafez al-Assad overthrew the regime led by Jadid in a bloodless coup, and ruled with an iron hand. Thus began a long period of authoritarian rule, characterized by political repression, a strong central government, and dominance of the Alawite minority in key positions of power. Although the regime brought stability to Syria, it came at the cost of political freedom and human rights abuses.

Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father upon his death in 2000 and continued his legacy of authoritarian rule. In February 2011, the echoes of the Tunisian revolution against oppression (January 2011) swept the streets of Damascus and his rule was

challenged by small demonstrations to begin with that snowballed into a country-wide protest movement in a matter of months. Thanks to the Bashar government's violent crackdown on peaceful protests, there was widespread unrest which eventually led to a full-scale civil war. The Syrian Civil War has, over the last 13 years, devastated the country, leading to significant loss of life, displacement of millions, and widespread destruction. The Assad regime drew widespread international condemnation because of his ruthless response to the uprising, marked by brutal crackdowns and the use of chemical weapons. The Assad regime dragged on through its alliances with Iran and Russia, which provided crucial support to the regime during the civil war, while the rebels who sought to bring it down through armed resistance were reportedly provided financial, logistical, political, and military aid by several countries including the US, France, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Kingdom.

### ***The Collapse***

The dramatic collapse of the Assad regime can be attributed to two primary factors. Firstly, since the onset of the 2011 Arab Uprising, Assad's survival has largely depended on the help from external

actors, particularly Iran, Russia, and Lebanon's Hezbollah. While both Iran and its Lebanese protégé, Hezbollah, supported the regime from the early days of the civil war, it was the decisive Russian military intervention in 2015 that prevented Assad's downfall at that time. Over the years, it has been Hezbollah and other Iran-backed militias—comprising predominantly Shia fighters from Iraq, Afghanistan, and even Pakistan (the Zainabiyoun Brigade)—that bolstered Syrian government forces and sustained their resistance against rebel factions.<sup>5</sup>

However, as the geopolitical dynamics shifted dramatically in the last few years, it severely impacted the extent of support these external actors extended to Assad. With Russia embroiled in a protracted war in Ukraine, suffering staggering losses in manpower and resources, Hezbollah was compelled to redirect its focus to its Lebanese home theatre amidst a war with Israel, and Iran itself engaged in conflict with Tel Aviv, the Assad regime's forces found themselves ill-equipped to counter the reinvigorated opposition fighters.

Secondly, despite maintaining his grip on power through external support, Bashar al-Assad remained deeply unpopular among the majority



of Syrians under his rule. The country's economy, ravaged by years of conflict and mismanagement, never recovered, plunging ordinary citizens—including Assad's own armed forces—into dire economic hardship. This pervasive struggle for basic survival eroded morale within the regime's ranks. Reports emerged of soldiers and police officers "abandoning their posts, handing over their weapons, and fleeing ahead of the advancing opposition," further exacerbating the regime's inability to mount an effective defence.<sup>6</sup> As Stanly Jhony argues, "Mr. Assad's troops were in a bad shape. Soldiers were poorly paid and lacked motivation. The country never recovered from the scars of the civil war."<sup>7</sup> This convergence of internal and external factors critically undermined the regime's ability to respond, paving the way for its downfall.

### **Who are Syria's New Rulers**

Several armed groups played critical roles in the military campaign to depose the Assad government. Mirroring Syria's diversity, these militias come with different ideological persuasions sans any central authority. Chief among them is Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), followed by the National Liberation Front (NLF), Jaish al-Izza, and the Turkish-backed Syrian National

Army (SNA). Of these, HTS, a Sunni Salafi organisation, has emerged as the most dominant force in the evolving power-scape.

The group traces its origins to Jabhat al-Nusra (Nusra Front), which was established in 2012 by Abu Mohammad al-Julani as Syria descended into civil war. It was conceived as an armed coalition encompassing groups like Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, Liwa al-Haqq, Jabhat Ansar al-Din, and Jaysh al-Sunna. The Nusra Front sought to overthrow the Assad regime. Although the group initially coordinated with what morphed into Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), al-Julani soon pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda in 2013, aligning Nusra as its Syrian affiliate.<sup>8</sup>

However, as the stigma of being an al-Qaeda proxy grew increasingly burdensome, al-Julani moved to sever the group's transnational jihadist ties. In 2016, Jabhat al-Nusra was rebranded as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, formally distancing itself from al-Qaeda. The rebranding continued in 2017 when the group adopted the name Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, and its leader, Al-Julani, started using his original name, Ahmed Al-Shurra.<sup>9</sup> Under this banner, HTS established the Syrian Salvation Government to administer opposition-controlled

territories in the Idlib Governorate, consolidating its position as the preeminent armed actor in the conflict.

Another significant armed actor is the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA), an umbrella organisation comprising numerous factions. Established in 2017 as the successor to the Free Syrian Army (FSA)—originally formed in 2011 to oppose the Assad regime—the SNA has operated under substantial Turkish patronage. Ankara's influence is evident in the names of its military divisions, such as the Sultan Suleyman Shah Brigade and the Sultan Murad Division, both named after prominent Ottoman figures.<sup>10</sup> These groups also operated their local government, called the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), which governed over non-HTS areas out of Azaz city in the north-northwest of Aleppo city.

The SNA has faced accusations of advancing Turkey's strategic objectives in Syria rather than prioritising the broader goals of the opposition. This became particularly apparent during the collapse of the Assad regime. While most opposition fighters concentrated their efforts on advancing toward Damascus, the SNA expanded its operations to target the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—a coalition of Syrian Kurdish groups supported by the United

States—in strategic areas such as Manbij and, more recently, Raqqa. These actions underscore the SNA's alignment with Turkey's broader geopolitical agenda, particularly its opposition to Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria.

In addition to HTS and SNA, the southern rebels represented by the Southern Operations Room, those who were the first to breach the defences of the Syrian capital on 8 December, have emerged as a formidable group in the new dynamics. Moreover, the Kurdish factions under SDF, despite SNA's campaign against its strongholds, will highly likely retain its degree of influence and how the new power brokers in Damascus address its claims will decide whether Syria will return to any semblance of stability anytime soon. The fate of Alawites, the Shia minority sect, which constituted much of Assad's force and government, despite assurances from HTS of a non-sectarian administration, hangs in the balance.<sup>11</sup>

### **What Assad's Fall Means for Neighbouring Regional Actors**

#### ***For Turkey***

So far, as events continue to unfold and Islamist militants consolidate their hold on power, Turkey appears

poised as the principal beneficiary of the fall of the Assad regime. With over a decade of strategic investment in supporting various Syrian opposition factions, from the 2011 Arab Uprising onwards, Ankara finds itself well-positioned to capitalise on its relationships with the emergent power brokers in Syria.

Firstly, notwithstanding its desire to refurbish its regional power credentials, Turkey views Syrian events from its national security perspective. Its immediate strategic priority lies in neutralising the influence of Syrian Kurdish factions, led by YPG), the armed wing of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), which have coalesced under the umbrella of the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Ankara considers these groups, particularly YPG, as ideological and operational extensions of the PKK (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê or Turkish Kurdistan Workers' Party), an outlawed entity engaged in a protracted insurgency against the Turkish state since the 1970s.<sup>12</sup> This explains the Turkey-backed Syrian National Army's (SNA) strategic military campaign against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) strongholds of Manbij and Raqqa in the northeast and east of Aleppo Governorate, respectively. By 11 December, SNA's had overtaken Manbij, with SDF

forces surrendering and retreating following a ceasefire even as the Turkish-backed opposition fighters continued pursuing Kurdish forces in Raqqa.

Furthermore, Turkey looks at the possibility of Kurdish political autonomy within Syria as a national security threat, fearing such developments could embolden parallel separatist aspirations among its own Kurdish population, especially because under similar circumstances the Kurds of Iraq had achieved de facto autonomous status. Interestingly, in this context, the prospect of decentralised governance, as advocated by HTS, could act as a potential friction point in Turkey's newfound strategic dynamics with Damascus, in the post-Assad period. Ankara's ability to dissuade Syria's new power centres from endorsing such a proposition will serve as a critical test of its diplomatic leverage and strategic acumen.

Secondly, since the 2011 Uprising, Turkey has officially hosted over 3 million Syrians, by far the largest Syrian refugee population globally, even as estimates put these numbers far higher. Over the years, this demographic reality has become a contentious political issue in Turkey, leveraged by opposition factions to

challenge President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's administration.<sup>13</sup> With the country's economy under strain due to Erdoğan's fiscal mismanagement, Syrian refugees were increasingly viewed as a drain on national resources, contributing to a rise in xenophobic incidents across Turkey. Ankara's long-term interest, therefore, lies in facilitating a political transition in Syria that can safeguard its national security objectives while enabling conditions conducive to the repatriation of refugees.

Thirdly, Turkey's newfound strategic influence in Damascus affords President Erdoğan a valuable geopolitical lever to engage with the Western world, particularly as the US prepares for a transition of power, with President-elect Donald Trump set to assume office from Joe Biden on 20 January. It can demonstrate its credentials as having helped decapitate the Iran-led Resistance Axis, which assures Israel's security, something that has been paramount for the Western governments led by the US.

Reflecting this nuanced positioning, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan emphasised his country's readiness to assume a proactive role in Syria's post-conflict stabilisation, stating: "The Syrian people have begun a new day in

which they will determine the future of their country." He further reaffirmed Ankara's commitment to ensure Syria's territorial "unity, integrity and security," undertake "whatever responsibility is necessary to heal Syria's wounds," and play a constructive role in facilitating the return of millions of Syrians to their homes in league with regional and international allies.<sup>14</sup>

Additionally, in his remarks at the Doha Forum on 8 December, Fidan emphasised unity among the anti-Assad groups to establish an 'inclusive' government. He remarked, "The new (Syrian) administration must be established in an orderly manner, the principle of inclusiveness must never be compromised, there must never be a desire for revenge. It is time to unite and reconstruct the country"<sup>15</sup> and asked all Syrian actors "to act with prudence and to be watchful," warning against allowing terrorist groups such as the Islamic State (Daesh) and PKK "to take advantage of this situation" to create disorder in Syria.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, going forward, Ankara is well poised to accrue a significant economic role in the reconstruction of war-torn Syria, which will positively impact the sluggish Turkish economy. However, whether

Turkey can effectively navigate the interplay of domestic imperatives and regional power dynamics will significantly shape its role in the evolving Syrian crisis.

### ***For Iran***

When the US invaded Iraq in 2003 and overthrew Saddam Hussein, Iran was handed the biggest geostrategic victory without firing a shot as it not only removed its biggest security threat but also provided it with strategic depth in Baghdad with the ascension of Shia factions to power. In stark contrast to its geostrategic fortunes, the removal of Bashar al-Assad has by far made Tehran a principal loser in the evolving geopolitical landscape.

For decades, Syria, under the Assad regime, represented Iran's most significant Arab ally, serving as a cornerstone of its so-called Axis of Resistance, which includes Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, the Houthi movement in Yemen, and various Iraqi Shia militias. Moreover, Syria also functioned as a critical direct logistical land corridor for the IRGC's Al-Quds Force, enabling it to transfer arms and munitions to Hezbollah in Lebanon and, by extension, to Hamas.

However, given the allegations of widespread human rights abuses by

Iranian and Iran-backed militias, including Hezbollah, in their near-decade-old defence of Assad's minority Alawite Shia regime, there is hardly any prospect of Syria's new Sunni leadership allowing Iran any significant bandwidth to maintain a direct line of communication with Hezbollah.<sup>17</sup> This shift not only dents its longstanding Arab alliance but also significantly impairs its operational capacity to support Hezbollah. As such, the Lebanese militant group faces mounting vulnerabilities, compounded by sustained Israeli airstrikes over recent months, which have resulted in the killing of a number of its key leaders, including Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah. Consequently, the fall of Assad's government marks a profound setback for Iran's regional strategy and its ability to project power through proxy forces.

Nevertheless, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei ascribed the fall of Bashar Al Assad to the joint conspiracy of the US and Israel, in collusion with Turkey, even as he refrained from taking Ankara's name directly and instead addressed it as a neighbouring country.<sup>18</sup> A statement from its Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 8 December emphasised "respecting Syria's unity, national sovereignty, and territorial integrity" and called

for an end to the hostilities besides “the initiation of national dialogue involving all segments of Syrian society to establish an inclusive governance structure that represents all Syrians.”<sup>19</sup> It further affirmed “to adopt appropriate approaches and positions as necessary” based on the “actions and conduct” of Syria’s new rulers.

### ***For Israel***

Besides Turkey, Israel has emerged as a net gainer in the overthrow of Bashar Al-Assad’s regime. For years, it sought to break Iran’s Resistance Axis, where Syria’s geographic location provided Tehran with direct access to arm Hezbollah in Lebanon against Tel Aviv. Assad’s removal, as of now, removes any such possibility. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu described the ouster of Bashar Al Assad as “a historic day in the history of the Middle East.” He further added that while Syria acted as “a central link in Iran’s axis of evil”, the fall of the Assad regime was:

“a direct result of the blows we have inflicted on Iran and Hezbollah, the main supporters of the Assad regime. This has created a chain reaction throughout the Middle East of all those who want to be free from this oppressive and tyrannical regime.”<sup>20</sup>

Israel has swiftly acted to take advantage of the unfolding events. For instance, within 48 hours of the fall of the Assad government on 8 December, Israel conducted 480 air strikes against Syrian military positions, its biggest-ever, even bigger than the 1967 war when it had pre-emptively struck Egypt, Jordan and Syria to occupy Syria’s Golan Heights and Egypt’s Sinai Desert, targeting the critical military infrastructure of the country.<sup>21</sup> In a statement on 11 December, the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) declared that its Army and Navy conducted over 350 strikes at “a wide range of targets, including anti-aircraft batteries, Syrian Air Force airfields, and dozens of weapons production sites in Damascus, Homs, Tartus, Latakia, and Palmyra.”<sup>22</sup>

Analysts have suggested that these incessant military strikes across Syria’s wide geographic expanse have “destroyed around 80 percent of the Syrian army’s strategic capabilities.”<sup>23</sup> This includes five major Syrian airbases such as Qamishli Airbase, Shinshar Airbase (Homs), Khalkhalah Airbase (Suwayda), Aqraba Airbase, and Mezzeh Airbase (near Damascus). Israeli attacks have reportedly also left much of Syria’s Naval capabilities in ruins with attacks on

Al-Bayda and Latakia naval bases, among others.

In addition, its ground forces have further advanced beyond the demilitarised security zone in the Occupied Golan Heights, taking over more Syrian land, including Mount Hermon (Jebel al-Sheikh), which is just 40km from Damascus, to what Israeli Defence Minister Israel Katz aimed at establishing “a sterile defence zone free of weapons and terrorist threats in southern Syria, without a permanent Israeli presence.”<sup>24</sup> Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu further emphasised that “The state of Israel is establishing its position as a centre of power in our region, as it has not been for decades. Those who cooperate with us, benefit greatly. Whoever attacks us, loses big.”<sup>25</sup> This demonstrates that Tel Aviv is fully capitalising on the evolving Syrian situation to create new ground realities along its border with Syria.

### **How Major Powers Reacted**

The fall of Bashar Al Assad’s regime evoked widespread response from major global powers. US President Joe Biden called Assad’s removal as “a fundamental act of justice. It’s a moment of historic opportunity for the long-suffering people of Syria to build a better future

for their proud country.”<sup>26</sup> He further claimed that it was Washington’s approach of “support for our partners, sanctions, and diplomacy and targeted military force when necessary” that helped shift the regional balance of power and open “new opportunities...for the people of Syria and for the entire region.”

US President-elect Donald Trump highlighted Russia’s lack of interest in protecting Assad’s regime while describing both Russia and Iran as weakened states. He remarked:

“Assad is gone. He has fled his country. His protector, Russia, Russia, Russia, led by Vladimir Putin, was not interested in protecting him any longer. There was no reason for Russia to be there in the first place. They lost all interest in Syria because of Ukraine, where close to 600,000 Russian soldiers lay wounded or dead, in a war that should never have started, and could go on forever. Russia and Iran are in a weakened state right now, one because of Ukraine and a bad economy, the other because of Israel and its fighting success.”<sup>27</sup>

China, which significantly supported Bashar Al-Assad’s regime over the years, and was among a handful of countries that the ousted Syrian president visited in the last over a decade, has responded in a

mented manner. Its Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that Beijing was “closely following the situation in Syria and hopes that relevant parties will bear in mind the fundamental interest of the Syrian people and find as soon as possible a political settlement that will restore stability in Syria.”<sup>28</sup> It further emphasised that “the future of Syria should be decided by the Syrian people,” urging relevant parties to “find a political settlement to restore stability and order in Syria for the long-term and fundamental interest of the Syrian people.” As its MFA spokeswoman, Mao Ning, asserted, “China’s friendly relations with Syria are for all Syrian people,” it could be seen as an offering an opening to Syria’s new rulers.

Russia, which was a key external backer of the Assad regime and even intervened on his behalf in 2015 to prevent his then-imminent downfall, stated that Moscow was “closely following the dramatic events in Syria” even as it called for cessation of armed hostilities and resolution of “all issues through political means.”<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, Bashar Al Assad fled to Russia as rebel fighters zeroed in on Damascus early on 8 December and has since, as reports suggest, been granted political asylum. Moreover, the country maintains two

military bases in Syria, one at Latakia and another at Tartous, whose fate remains uncertain. It appears that there has been an understanding through Turkey over the fate of Russian military bases, which accords Moscow an extended outreach into the Mediterranean, following which Ankara green-signalled the 27 November Operation Deterrence of Aggression that resulted in the downfall of the regime.

Among the Arab countries, Saudi Arabia cautioned against creating further chaos in the country and the region, stating that Riyadh maintained constant communication with all regional actors, along with every stakeholder involved in Syria, including Turkey. Egypt called on Syrian militant and political actors “to preserve the capabilities of the state and national institutions” while affirming “its support for the Syrian people and the country’s sovereignty and unity.” Likewise, while Jordan’s King Abdullah welcomed “the choices of the Syrian people,” the Iraqi government stated that it maintained a constant vigil over the events in Syria. Baghdad further reaffirmed “the importance of not interfering in the internal affairs of Syria, or supporting one party in favour of another.”<sup>30</sup>



### **Implications for India**

India has approached the evolving developments in Syria with a considerable degree of caution and concern. Following the overthrow of the Assad government, India's Ministry of External Affairs (EAM) emphasised on importance of preserving Syria's territorial integrity and sovereignty while calling for a "peaceful and inclusive Syrian-led political process," thereby demonstrating its consistent diplomatic stance of advocating non-interventionism and fostering reconciliation through dialogue. In an official statement, the Ministry remarked:

"We are monitoring the situation in Syria in the light of ongoing developments. We underline the need for all parties to work towards preserving the unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of Syria. We advocate a peaceful and inclusive Syrian-led political process respecting the interests and aspirations of all sections of Syrian society."<sup>31</sup>

The regime change in Damascus does come with significant ramifications for New Delhi in light of India's historically strong bilateral ties with Syria under the Assad family's rule. Over the decades, the two countries supported each other

on their issues of strategic and political concern. India affirmed its backing to Syria on its territorial claims over Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, while Syria, under Assad reciprocated by supporting India's stance on Kashmir, particularly in countering Pakistan's attempts to internationalise the issue.

It may be recalled that during the height of the Arab Uprising protests in 2011, India consistently underscored its preference for a non-military resolution of the issues and advocated for "an inclusive Syrian-led political process."<sup>32</sup> This position was also reflected in its support for United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2254 of 2015, reaffirming New Delhi's "firm commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic."

In terms of developmental engagement, New Delhi has extended substantial financial assistance to Damascus over the years. This includes a \$240 million Line of Credit (LoC) for the Tishreen Thermal Power Plant in 2009, along with "investments in IT infrastructure, steel plant modernisation, the oil sector, and significant exports of rice, pharmaceuticals, and textiles."<sup>33</sup>

As such, the evolving dynamics in Syria and the ascendancy of pro-Turkish SNA-led factions and HTS-led Islamist forces in Damascus have the potential to adversely affect New Delhi's strategic calculus, particularly in light of Ankara's expanding influence in the country. This development assumes particular significance in the context of a persistent degree of mistrust between India and Turkey, stemming from Ankara's historical conflation of its policy approach toward New Delhi with its alignment with Pakistan. This orientation has significantly impeded the broadening of bilateral economic cooperation between the two countries. Although President Erdoan's notable omission of any reference to Kashmir during this year's annual address at the United Nations General Assembly in

October suggests a potential recalibration of Ankara's stance vis-à-vis India, the degree of substantive change remains uncertain. Consequently, New Delhi may find itself compelled to adopt a cautious "wait-and-watch" posture as it assesses the trajectory of regional developments.

India's concerns are further compounded by the potential resurgence of extremist groups such as the Islamic State in the altered power dynamics in Syria, further complicating its broader strategic interests in the region. However, having said this, India cannot afford to take a back seat. At some point, it would need to engage with Syria's new political reality to safeguard its interests in the country and the broader region. But for now, wait-and-watch is the need of the hour. ■

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