

India readjusts as Assad's rule in Damascus ends

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The Fall of Damascus: Assad's Sudden Departure

In the early hours of the 9th of December, Syrian rebel forces, led by the Hayat Tahrir al-Shaam (HTS), entered the suburbs of Damascus for the final stages of a lightning offensive. The rebel takeover of Damascus forced long-time Syrian President Bashar al Assad to flee, reportedly to Moscow, ending 50 years of Assad rule. The first Indian reaction came in the form of an [MEA Travel Advisory](#) on the 6th, with language similar to that issued in [2012](#) when the civil war first broke out. In a more elaborate statement on the 9th, once the inevitability of Assad's ouster was evident, the MEA [underlined](#) 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.” India’s official expressions have been characterized by a non-Assad focus, a quick acceptance of the new reality in Damascus, and advocacy for inclusive governance – a feature lacking within the erstwhile Ba’ath Party-dominated government. Arguably even more categorical than the “[wait and watch policy](#)” that India outlined in the aftermath of the Taliban takeover of Kabul, this marks a momentous shift in India’s Middle East policy where Assad was arguably the last among the several stable but authoritarian leaders that India enjoyed good relations with.



Strategic Implications for Indo-Syrian Relations

For India, Assad was categorically an [ally](#). The strong ties between Assad-ruled Syria and New Delhi were a continuation of India’s strong relations with secular Arab regimes, including the two ostensibly secular Ba’athist governments in Iraq and Syria. New Delhi was particularly vocal in criticizing Washington for its forceful removal of Saddam Hussein during its 2003 Iraq invasion, with the Indian Parliament even passing a resolution to that accord. However, this logic had

also extended to other Middle Eastern leaders, with India maintaining [critical tones](#) against Western action against other leaders such as Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. While leaders across the Middle Eastern chessboard fell – either as a result of Western military action or internal revolutions such as those during the Arab Spring – Syria's Assad survived with Russian and Iranian aid. Consequently, while the US military action in Syria across the last decade has been characterized in anti-ISIS terms, the international case against Assad, both for grave violations of human rights as well as the alleged storage and use of chemical weapons, arguably gave India some pause during the civil war.

However, this did not prevent New Delhi from continuing to [engage](#) Damascus – through long-standing cooperative arrangements on trade, technology, oil exploration, and cultural exchanges. For the projects affected by sanctions, New Delhi (which has usually viewed such anti-state sanctions as tools that do [“not serve any purpose”](#)), recognized the need to account for their impact and adjust project completion dates. India's grudging acquiescence to Western-led sanctions against Middle Eastern states was especially evident when India strongly sought exceptions to Washington's CAATSA sanctions against Iran before it ultimately stopped Iranian oil imports. In Syria's case, Assad's consistent support to New Delhi over issues such as Kashmir, which Damascus deemed [“India's internal issue”](#), only helped the relationship further.

Naturally, then, when Assad's government collapsed, India lost a valuable ally – as is also evident in Indian media portrayals of developments in Damascus. Notably, such portrayals (including comments/analyses by former diplomats) also included critical comments on Western characterizations of al-Jolani as a reformed, militant leader rather than as a jihadist, as opposed to Assad, who is characterized as an oppressive dictator. Among other things, these comments

coincide with a period of unease between the Indian government and the US State Department. This has rejuvenated, even if momentarily, expressions of anti-Western/anti-American sentiment in Indian analytical commentary.

However, India's mild response to Assad's fall is characteristic of its view of the larger instability prevailing in the Middle East – all collectively dent India's interests. For instance, speaking at the Doha Forum on the 10th of December on Syria, India's External Affairs Minister asserted that Assad's fall was a “surprise”, but also highlighted that India was “some distance away”. Jaishankar cited India's diasporic numbers in the larger Middle East and its cumulative trade with Arab states to [argue](#) that “what's happening in Syria...Gaza and Lebanon...is impacting (India). We're feeling it in shipping costs. We're feeling it in trade disruptions.”

The EAM's comment shows that India's concerns are justifiably focused on the global impact of regional conflicts in the Middle East (with the Yemen-based Houthis continuing to disrupt Red Sea shipping lanes successfully). However, they also reflect New Delhi's relatively new ability to embrace change in both its near and extended neighborhoods, no matter how deep the older relationship; India's Minister of State for External Affairs (when meeting Assad in Damascus) had committed to taking bilateral cooperation to a “higher level” as recently as July 2023. In Syria, India's swift acceptance of the rebel takeover and non-expressions of concern for Assad's personal safety is also indicative of New Delhi's desire to not prematurely affect its relations with any new upcoming administration (with the transition has already begun). Having secured its humanitarian needs (evacuation of about 75 Indians), India's path of least resistance is to join the call for the new government to be inclusive, gently sidelining the possibility of Assad's return at any point in time in the future.

Regional Dynamics and India's Diplomatic Path Forward

While India's old Syria policy has seemingly ended with the end of the Assad regime, the challenges India faces in the region in light of the new instability since the 7th of October, 2023, have only been exacerbated. Note that under Assad, Syria had primarily stayed out of the Israel-Gaza-Lebanon war, ensuring that the theatre of war remains restricted to the extent possible. However, with a variety of armed groups now in control of Syria's map, the variables of conflict only increase; Israel's re-occupation of parts of the Golan Heights from which it had withdrawn leaves open the possibility of fresh disputes between Israel and any of the Syrian armed groups. While a total of 21 officers and 124 personnel of the Indian Army [remain](#) in Syria as part of the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF), an expansion of the war only threatens their positions further. While these are immediate tactical concerns, the new realities of the Middle East not only further jeopardize the possibility of ambitious connectivity projects coming to fruition but also empower states such as Turkey, which has emerged as the principal external victor in Syria, where India's old ally has been ousted. While Ankara has long been miffed with Indian-led connectivity projects such as the IMEEC (which leaves Turkey out), Erdogan's expressions on India have usually been viewed adversely in New Delhi, least of which are his criticisms of India over Kashmir. On the grander chessboard of the Middle East, should more pro-status quo leaders lose power or get embroiled in proxy wars that resemble the decade pre-2020-2023, then India too has to relinquish itself to the staid indifference it was forced to assert before the Abraham Accords provided a moment of opportunity for New Delhi to take the initiative. For now, India will "wait and watch" in the Middle East, as it did in Afghanistan, even if this is not a stated policy.