



UNDERSTANDING SYRIAN CRISIS IN THE LEVANT: INTERNATIONAL: GS - II



Prelude to the Crisis in the Levant

The Levant, a region historically mired in geopolitical complexities, has long been a theatre of shifting alliances, ideological rivalries, and external interventions. Syria, a central player in this dynamic, became a focal point of instability during the Arab Spring in 2011, when a wave of pro-democracy uprisings swept across the Middle East and North Africa. However, Syria's civil war quickly devolved into a multifaceted conflict with far-reaching implications.

The Assad regime, dominated by the Alawite minority and supported by Iran's Islamic



Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), held power for decades, enforcing secularism but with authoritarian control. This alliance enabled Iran to establish a foothold in the Levant, creating a corridor to support Hezbollah in Lebanon and project influence against Israel.

When civil unrest erupted, it was met with severe repression, sparking a conflict that drew in an array of domestic and international players. The United States, Sunni Gulf states, and various rebel factions opposed Assad, while Russia and Iran supported him, leading to a proxy war within Syria's borders. The defeat of ISIS in 2018 and the pandemic brought a semblance of lull to the crisis, but the roots of discord remained unresolved.

The Recent Meltdown

In recent months, the fragile equilibrium in Syria shattered with the dramatic rise of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a jihadist group with origins in Al-Qaeda. HTS, having evolved from the Al-Nusra Front, capitalized on governance failures and weakened deterrence from Assad's forces to capture significant territories, including Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs. The speed and scale of this collapse took observers by surprise, especially given the presence of global surveillance systems and intelligence apparatuses.

While the Assad regime had held on tenuously to power, its downfall can be attributed to a combination of domestic dissatisfaction, external pressures, and shifting dynamics among key stakeholders in the region. With Assad's forces retreating and HTS consolidating control, the Levant faces a new and unpredictable phase of conflict.

Reasons for the Sudden Crisis

The sudden meltdown in Syria can be attributed to three primary factors:

1. Governance Failures of the Assad Regime

Years of mismanagement, corruption, and authoritarianism eroded the regime's credibility among Syrians. Public discontent over economic hardships and lack of basic services further alienated the populace, pushing them to support opposition forces like HTS.

2. Erosion of Iranian Influence

Iran's strategic dominance in the Levant suffered due to multiple setbacks. The weakening of Hezbollah in south Lebanon over the past year, exacerbated by Israel's military actions, disrupted Tehran's supply lines. The rise of HTS further undermined Iran's ability to maintain a stronghold in Syria, threatening its broader goal of a "Shia Crescent."

3. Russian Distraction and Weakness

Russia's involvement in the Ukraine war significantly reduced its ability to project power in the Middle East. Russian Special Forces and air support, once critical in stabilizing Assad's regime, were conspicuously absent during the HTS offensive. A feeble Russian



counterattack underscored its diminished capacity to intervene effectively in Syria.

Parties Associated with the Crisis and Their Interests

The complexity of the Syrian conflict arises from the diverse and often conflicting interests of the involved parties:

1. HTS and Its Jihadist Agenda

HTS has emerged as a formidable force, seizing control of key Syrian cities. While its leader, Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, has made conciliatory statements, concerns remain about the group's potential to follow the trajectory of ISIS and declare a caliphate.

2. Iran and Hezbollah

Iran's strategic interests in Syria revolve around maintaining a corridor to Hezbollah and safeguarding its influence in the Levant. The weakening of its proxies and loss of a friendly regime in Damascus represent a significant setback.

3. Israel

Israel stands to benefit from the upheaval, as Iran's supply chain to Hezbollah is disrupted. This reduces the immediate threat posed by Hezbollah's arsenal and allows Israel to focus its military resources on other fronts, such as Gaza.

4. Russia

Russia's primary interest in Syria has been maintaining access to the Mediterranean via its naval base in Latakia. However, its preoccupation with Ukraine has curtailed its ability to assert influence in the region.

5. United States and Sunni Gulf States

The US and its allies have historically supported opposition forces to counterbalance Iran's influence and undermine Assad's anti-Israel stance. Although direct involvement has waned, allegations of covert support to groups like HTS have surfaced.

6. Turkey

Turkey's interests in Syria include countering Kurdish forces and managing the refugee crisis. Its indirect support for opposition factions aligns with its broader regional goals.

Advantages to Israel

The current upheaval in Syria presents several strategic advantages for Israel:

1. Disruption of Iran's Supply Chain

With Assad's regime weakened and HTS in control, Iran's ability to transport weapons and resources to Hezbollah is significantly compromised. This hampers Hezbollah's capacity to threaten Israel with large-scale missile attacks.

2. Focus on Gaza and Internal Security

The reduced threat from Syria allows Israel to redirect its military resources and attention to the conflict in Gaza, where it seeks to achieve decisive outcomes against Hamas.



3. Weakened Iranian Influence in the Region

The erosion of Iran's foothold in Syria disrupts its broader strategy of encircling Israel through proxy forces. This represents a significant strategic win for Israel in the ongoing regional power struggle.

Future Scope

The fall of the Assad regime and the rise of HTS open several possible trajectories for the region:

1. Stabilization or Chaos Under HTS

If HTS consolidates power without pursuing an extremist agenda akin to ISIS, the Levant could see relative stability. However, the group's jihadist roots raise concerns about the establishment of a new caliphate and the resurgence of terrorism.

2. Iran's Counterstrategy

Iran is unlikely to accept its diminished influence without a fight. A calibrated response, potentially involving Hezbollah or other proxies, could reignite conflict in the region, escalating tensions with Israel.

3. Renewed International Involvement

The power vacuum in Syria may draw renewed attention from global powers. The US and its allies could leverage the situation to counter Russian and Iranian influence, while Russia may attempt to reassert itself despite its constraints.

4. Impact on Regional Alliances

The shifting dynamics in Syria could influence broader Middle Eastern alliances. Saudi Arabia and Turkey, with their evolving strategies, may play more active roles in shaping the region's future.

Conclusion

The unfolding crisis in Syria underscores the fragility of the Levant's geopolitical landscape. The fall of the Assad regime, coupled with the rise of HTS, has disrupted longstanding power structures and introduced new uncertainties. While Israel appears to gain strategically from the weakening of Iran's influence, the region remains on the brink of further instability. The international community must carefully navigate this volatile situation to prevent a resurgence of extremism and ensure a sustainable resolution to the Syrian conflict.

Main Practice Question

Analyze the factors leading to the recent collapse of the Assad regime in Syria and the rise of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). Discuss the implications of this development on regional stability in the Middle East, focusing on the interests of major stakeholders like Iran, Russia, and Israel. (250 words)



Answer Guidelines

Introduction (30-40 words):

Begin by briefly outlining the significance of Syria in the Levant and its centrality to regional geopolitics. Mention the collapse of the Assad regime and the rise of HTS as a pivotal development in the Middle East.

Main Body:

1. Factors Leading to the Collapse (70-80 words):

- **Governance Failures:** Highlight Assad's authoritarian rule, corruption, and economic mismanagement, which alienated the populace.
- **Erosion of Iranian Influence:** Explain the weakening of Iran's control over the Levant due to Hezbollah's setbacks in Lebanon and disruptions caused by Israeli offensives.
- **Russian Distraction:** Discuss Russia's diminished involvement in Syria due to its preoccupation with the Ukraine war, weakening its ability to support Assad.

2. Rise of HTS (50-60 words):

Detail how HTS capitalized on the Assad regime's failures and the regional power vacuum to gain control over major cities like Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs. Note its jihadist origins and potential trajectory.

Implications on Regional Stability (90-100 words):

- **Iran:** Explain how the disrupted supply chain to Hezbollah undermines Iran's influence in the Levant.
- **Israel:** Discuss how the weakened Iranian presence benefits Israel by reducing threats from Hezbollah, allowing a focus on Gaza.
- **Russia:** Highlight Russia's diminished leverage in the Middle East due to its strategic distractions.
- **Global Risks:** Address the possibility of HTS evolving into another extremist regime like ISIS, threatening regional and global stability.

Conclusion (30-40 words):

Summarize the criticality of Syria's future trajectory and emphasize the importance of coordinated international efforts to stabilize the region and prevent another extremist stronghold.



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MIND MAP:

