

Understanding India's Response to the Syrian Civil War

KETAN MEHTA

ABSTRACT The popular uprising against the Assad regime in 2011, which gradually evolved into a civil conflict, has been one of contemporary human history's greatest tragedies. The conflict has claimed more than 400,000 lives; over six million Syrians have been internally displaced. India has not joined the call for an end to the Assad-led Baath Party rule over Syria. While this position may not hold much weight on its own, it strengthens with the consolidated stance taken by forums such as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia India, China, South Africa), and it can be argued that the opinion of the BRICS nations has helped fuel the longevity of the Assad regime. India-Syria ties have gained salience since Pakistan began questioning New Delhi's human rights record in the Muslim-majority state of Jammu & Kashmir. This brief argues that India's calculated response to the Syrian crisis is a reciprocatory gesture to Damascus for its continued support to India over the Kashmir question.

INTRODUCTION

Syria has been in a state of civil war since the 2011 uprising known as the “Arab Spring.” Yet this civil war is no longer just an internal Syrian calamity; it has triggered sectarian tensions, geopolitical rivalries, and the global threat of Islamic extremism. Within the region, Syria has become a battleground for Saudi-backed rebel groups and Iran-backed Hezbollah. Other Gulf

states such as Qatar, too, have used proxies to vie for influence in the Syrian civil war.

The internal conflict has incentivised Iran to reassert itself as a key player beyond the Persian Gulf and allowed Shia militia movements to rejuvenate and find new avenues for expansion. The extremist group IS (Islamic State), having extended its reach to South Asia¹—home to the

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largest Muslim population in the world—is of concern to New Delhi, which has significant stakes in the South Asian realm. The threat is compounded by the fact that IS has started attracting Indian youth.

It is thus important to analyse India's careful posturing in Syria, keeping in mind the highlighted facets linked to the conflict and its own stakes in the Middle East, which have influenced India's decision-making. In the context of the Arab Spring, which posed a challenge to the authoritarian Assad regime, this brief argues that India's tacit support for the regime is driven by two factors. The first is its fears of instability and the rise of Islamists as it happened in post-Gaddafi Libya. The second is its commitment to non-interventionism, a position shared by members of the BRICS countries that have refrained from acquiescing to a military intervention against the regime.

In addition to these factors, the Baath Party's continued pro-India stance on the Kashmir issue pushes India to take a position on the Syrian crisis that seems to favour the Assad regime. Given that India has abstained from most UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions on Syria—and having supported one Arab League sponsored resolution—it can be argued that the country's position stems from a compulsion to be on the same side of the fence as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. After all, India's ties with these countries are more elaborate. At the same time, by not acknowledging their explicit demand for a regime change, India has skilfully co-opted with the Assad regime in the crisis.³ However, this feature of India's foreign policy has not affected its ties with the regional powers in the Arab world, such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia, which have pursued divergent regional interests. So far, despite being the largest democracy seeking greater ties with the West, New Delhi has ignored calls for military intervention on humanitarian grounds.⁴

INDO-SYRIAN TIES

India–Syria partnership is relatively nascent compared to India's relations with Russia or Iran, who are vital partners of the Assad regime. India's disinterest in a regime change continues, despite its comprehensive ties with the GCC countries, who have routinely intervened to evict Assad. GCC countries remain crucial in securing India's primary interest in the region, i.e., energy security and remittances, unlike Syria, with which India's trade has never touched the US\$1-billion mark.⁵ Moreover, at the moment, Syria is an insignificant source of oil for India.⁶

This suggests that New Delhi's interests in the Middle Eastern states are not driven solely by its aim to achieve energy security. In the case of India–Syria bilateral relationships, the Global South cause appears to be a crucial moving factor along with Syria's support to India on the Kashmir question.

Initially, Syria—the only Arab member in the UNSC in 1948—had supported Pakistan on the Kashmir cause⁷ and had irked India by extending support to the Nizam of Hyderabad on the behest of the Egyptians. This resulted in New Delhi giving recognition to Israel in 1950, much to the dismay of the Arabs.⁸ The basis of Indo-Syrian partnership emerged later with the ascendancy of the Non-Aligned Movement leader, Gamal Naseer, as the President of the United Arab Republic (UAR, a union of Syria and Egypt). Naseer, by maintaining strict neutrality over political issues, allowed relations to prosper despite Pakistan's efforts to achieve Islamic solidarity on the Kashmir issue.

Thus, the Egyptian and Syrian alliance of the UAR (1958-1961),⁹ consolidated Syria's position on the issue of Kashmiri self-determination, which has been India's Achilles heel in its relationship with the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation.

However, the consolidation of power by the Assad family in 1971 pushed the regime to forge new partnerships beyond Middle East as a means to counter the regional isolation generated by Syria's rivalry with Israel and the Gulf states. During this phase, New Delhi found it easier to work with Damascus, which resulted in Indo-Syrian cooperation on political issues that remains effective till date.¹⁰ Therefore, the geopolitical rivalry in the region which created the space for Indian–Syrian bonhomie, allowed Delhi to recraft the Middle East policy, which, according to the then Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh, had fallen victim to “vote bank” politics.¹¹ Thus, despite Syria not being a major power in the region, its support for India's position on Kashmir is welcome, and India's tacit approval of the regime is well understood as a *quid pro quo*.

Recently, the emergence of a consolidated viewpoint of groupings such as BRICS¹² and IBSA (India, Brazil and South Africa)¹³ on the Syrian crisis has lent weight to the Indian opinion. Since the New Delhi summit held in 2012, BRICS states have routinely called for respecting Syria's territorial and political sovereignty, thus obstructing the West's and the GCC's efforts to weaken the Assad regime.¹⁴ Having lost recognition in major regional forums such as the Arab League¹⁵ and the OIC,¹⁶ the regime seeks to maintain credibility by imparting importance to forums like BRICS and IBSA. The Indian position therefore would have been less significant than what it is now with the emergence of the BRICS order.¹⁷

The Syrian regime that finds BRICS on its side has called for a greater role of the grouping in easing tensions. India's soft approach which favours Assad despite not having comprehensive economic ties with Syria, has played out well, diplomatically.

INDIA'S CALCULATED RESPONSE

Expecting significant deviation in India's policy

of tolerating the Assad regime is unwarranted, keeping in mind India's past disapprovals of regime change in the Arab world. Despite conveying displeasure against a no-fly zone resolution on Libya,¹⁸ New Delhi could not prevent the Gaddafi regime's downfall. This proved to be a watershed as thereafter India—along with other BRICS states—would resolutely oppose the regime change narrative of the Global North, especially when its primary interests are intertwined with political stability in the region.

At the Geneva II peace conference in 2014, India's perspective was reflected in the statement of then Foreign Minister Salman Khurshid: “India believes that societies cannot be re-ordered from outside and that people in all countries have the right to choose their own destiny and decide their own future. In line with this, India supports an all-inclusive Syrian-led process to chart out the future of Syria, its political structures and leadership.”¹⁹

Three inferences can be drawn from India's current foreign policy in the context of the Syrian crisis. First, New Delhi prefers stability over instability, since it is confronted with the conundrum of “Who after Assad?” and “What role would the Islamist rebel faction play?” This fear is magnified by the fact that Islamic extremists are intending to find a new haven in Afghanistan, which happens to be pivotal for India's interests in South Asia. Since IS has expanded its reach to Bangladesh and has found support in the volatile region of Kashmir, New Delhi's concerns now seem extremely valid. In all, there is enough reason for scepticism and lack of confidence in the opposition's ability to guide Syria, especially when the civil war has turned out to be less of a “people's revolution” and more of a “proxy war” between regional rivals, each with their own geopolitical objectives.²⁰

The second inference comes from the assertion that India shares a consolidated opinion with other BRICS states on the

question of intervention. The BRICS states have questioned the UNSC's authority to intervene on humanitarian grounds.²¹ This comes from the finding that India, like other IBSA states, does not confer support to the strongest humanitarian positions.²² However, it is evident that New Delhi supports the nations of the developing world in their contention with the West. In this case, it has relegated the question of regime change to its shared principle of non-interventionism, support for the Arab–Palestinian cause, and the secularism of the Syrian Baath Party.

Most importantly, it is India's own domestic conundrum in Kashmir that shapes its response. Since the development of the issue in 1947, New Delhi has been interested in treating the dispute over the Muslim-majority state of Jammu and Kashmir and its consequences unilaterally. As successive Indian governments believed that the resolution of the dispute was New Delhi's own discretion, Kashmir became an international issue, particularly popular among the Islamists.

Being unable to draw the attention of the West, which shelved the Kashmir issue as they find India pivotal in balancing the South Asian realm, Pakistan courted the OIC in an effort to marginalise India within the Islamic world.²³ The vulnerability of being isolated by the Arab members of the OIC, incentivised New Delhi to focus on exploiting the faultlines in the Islamic community by strengthening ties with Syria. This was evident in the visit of Minister of State for External Affairs M.J. Akbar, who assured India's tacit support to the regime in return for Assad's acknowledgement of the Indian narrative on the Kashmir issue, in the background of growing pressure from the OIC.²⁴ New Delhi's concerns are bound to increase, now that it has lost two vital allies—Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi—who seconded India's Kashmir policy. Therefore, maintaining its ties with Damascus will remain a tool for Indian diplomacy.


Nevertheless, the Indian position that reflects confidence in the Assad regime cannot be as unequivocal as that of Russia. Despite the controversial role of the Gulf states, New Delhi's compulsion to not be a known partner of the regime stems from its primary objective in the Middle East: to secure energy security and the well-being of its diaspora. This demands maintaining friendly ties with Riyadh and its partners.

Salman Khurshid's statement at the Geneva II conference in 2014 addressed this concern: “India has important stakes in the Syrian conflict. It shares deep historical and civilisational bonds with the wider West Asia and the Gulf region. We have substantial interests in the fields of trade and investment, diaspora, remittances, energy and security. Any spillover from the Syrian conflict has the potential of impacting negatively on our larger interests.”²⁵

In all, New Delhi's opinion, has less to do with the Western bloc's wishes but more with securing its trade and comprehensive ties with the GCC countries. The recent visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the UAE and Saudi Arabia²⁶ at this critical juncture suggests that the leadership is seeking to go beyond a relationship based on energy supplies, which till now had dominated India's engagement with the GCC countries. India and UAE have conceived a strategic partnership at a time when New Delhi is seeking major investments in infrastructure from the latter.²⁷

Currently, explicitly backing Tehran (a key ally of the Assad regime) where it is increasingly under the threat of sanctions by the new US administration, can jeopardise India's important partnership with the Gulf. And, given the sectarian nature of the proxy war, in which Tehran is being condemned for its role in Yemen and Syria, there is little reason to discontinue New Delhi's partnership with the GCC states, with which it has more comprehensive ties.

In conclusion, India's position on the Syrian crisis is rooted in the aforementioned caveats of its foreign policy objectives, along with the necessity to maintain cordial relationships with the GCC member states. At the same time, realising the expectations of the Assad regime in return for its support to New

Delhi's position on the Kashmir crises, India has conveniently chosen to forgo the concerns of human rights groups. Supported by a consolidated BRICS position, it has been able to maintain its opinion against the influence of the GCC countries, helping to embolden the Baath rule. 

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ketan Mehta is a Research Intern at ORF.

ENDNOTES

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20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area, New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA
Ph. : +91-11-43520020, 30220020. Fax : +91-11-43520003, 23210773
E-mail: contactus@orfonline.org
Website: www.orfonline.org