

## PART - II

Q.2: HTS Islamist rebels have toppled Al-Assad. Evaluate reasons and implications.

### Answer

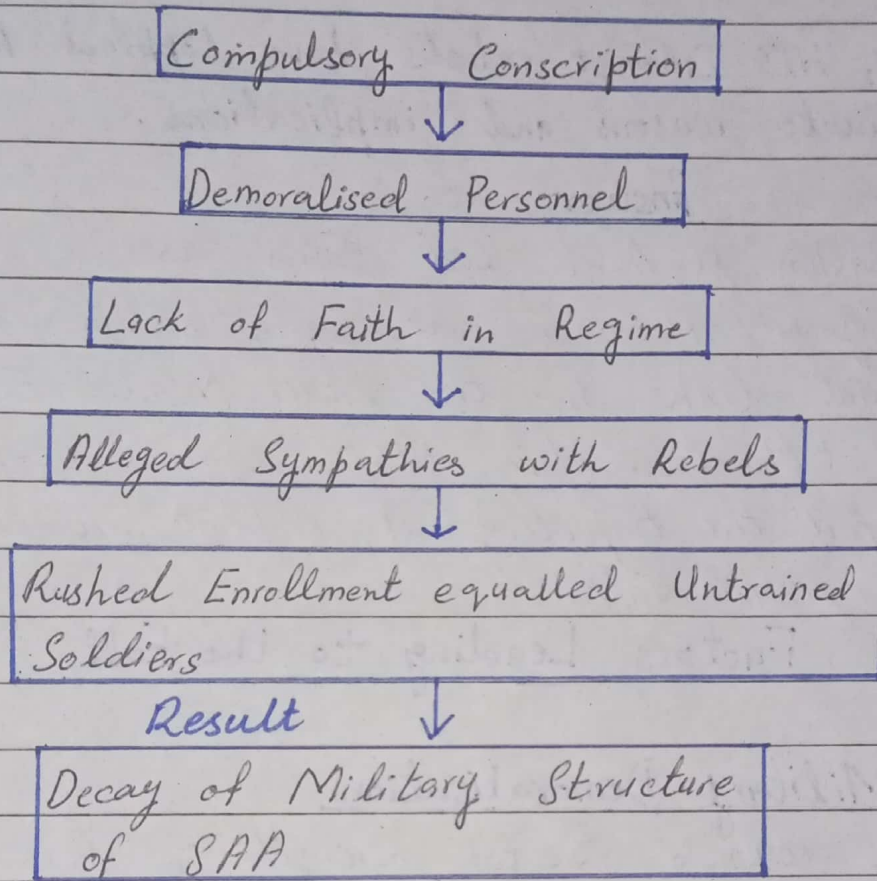
Bashar Al-Assad led Syria as a strongman. His era saw Syria become a crucial link in the wider Middle-East conflict theatre. With HTS' rise and Al-Assad's downfall the trajectory of conflict will take a perceptible shift.

### Factors Leading to the Fall

#### 1. Military Demoralisation

Any regime's foremost strength is its military. While democratic governments derive legitimacy from popular support and depend on military for protection, undemocratic regimes depend on military to cement their rule. A historical example is Khmer Rouge regime. It did not command its citizenry's approval. However, its military became its backbone. Similarly, Al-Assad regime depended heavily on Syrian Arab Army (SAA). In recent years SAA has countenanced mass desertions leading to a hollowed out structure. This left SAA incapacitated to counter advancing rebels. Following is a structural representation of this

factor :



## 2. Absent Allies

(i) Russia: Support from Moscow dwindled in light of Russia's active engagement in Ukraine. Demands of western front required allocation of strategic focus away from Syria.

Another shift came when Moscow moved its Air-Defense System to Libya in a possible preparation of future ambitions.

(ii) Hezbollah and Iran: Hezbollah got seriously weakened after a fourteen months long face off with Israel. In the past

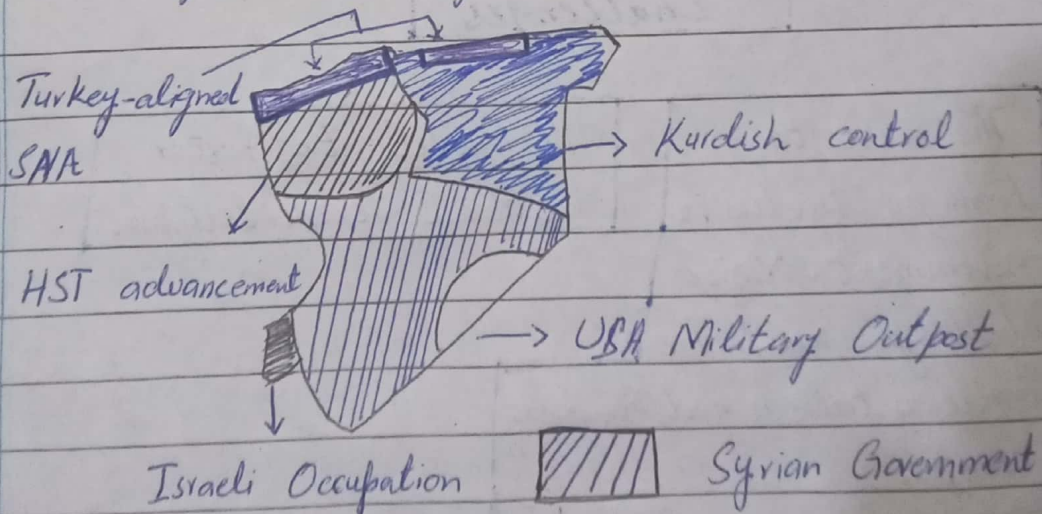
it provided Al-Asad regime essential kinetic assistance.

Similarly, Al-Asad positioned Syria within 'Axis of Resistance' that is commanded by Iran. However, Iran recently made the decision to call back its senior advisors. Thus, leaving Syria to fend itself on its own.

Conclusively, in war between Israel and Iran and its proxy outfits, Al-Asad regime became the collateral.

### 3. Unfavourable Circumstances for the Regime

Al-Asad regime was being circled by elements beyond their control. These included the ethnic and religious demographics as well as Al-Asad regime's limited control over Syrian territory. For illustration:



Syrian government of Al-Asad was initially only engaged with HST and its ally Turkey-aligned Syrian National Army (SNA) in the

north. However, formerly pacified rebels in south also became activated soon afterwards.

In North-East USA-aligned Kurdish militia YPG also engaged against Al-Asad's forces.

Another factor is involvement of identity politics Al-Asad and his father, Hafez, before him ruled Syria for almost fifty-five years.

The Al-Asad family belongs to Alawite heterodoxical offshoot of Shia Islam that constitutes only 13% of Syrian population while 74% of population of Syria is Sunni Muslim. This saw masses of Syria sympathise with HTS and SNA.

## Implications of the Fall

### Governance Challenges

The need to form an inclusive government. Major challenge would be fundamentalism and Kurdish groups.

The need to foster national reconciliation.

Kurds have been demanding extended autonomy. Meanwhile, fundamentalists can push for imposition of laws that will alienate Christian and Druze minorities.

## Regional Dynamics and Larger Conflict

With Russia engaged, Hezbollah decimated, and Al-Asad gone Iran's position against Israel has been crippled.

Israel has begun an invasion from occupied Golan Heights under the garb of establishing a buffer zone.

HST will have to ensure all regional players and international stakeholders of its sworn neutrality. Else Syria is no longer in a position to further the aims of external actors. If it does try to execute such a role the country could see itself entangled in another power struggle.

Security  
Spectre  
Redefined

Looming ISIL Threat

## Turkey's security and its position against YPG

### New US interests in Syria

Al-Asad regime with Russian backing did a good job at keeping ISIL at bay. The new government is young and is a collective of multiple factions. The current atmosphere can allow resurgence of ISIL. On other hand, YPG presence in Syria remains a threat for Syria. Turkey. Thus, Syria's new government will have to tread carefully.

Conclusion: Overth<sup>w</sup>rought of Al-Asad regime and rise of HTS has started a new chapter in Middle-Eastern conflict. The collapse was driven by low morale and withdrawal of critical support from key allies. Now, Syria faces challenge of forming an inclusive transitional government.

Syria also requires support from international community. It needs urgent aid to rebuild infrastructure and address the need to rehabilitate millions of displaced persons. The transitional phase for Syria will be pivotal for its future and that of Middle East's.